

## Science grad gets taste of medicine volunteering at Peruvian posta

By Kym Wolfe

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*Gillian Bayley helps a nurse named Rosa suture the head wound of a patient at a posta.*

Gillian Bayley, BSc'05, is keen to practice medicine, so when she wasn't accepted into medical school last year that didn't stop her from pursuing her goal. From October 2005 to January 2006, Bayley worked in a clinic in an impoverished village in Peru, and that three-month stint confirmed for her that being a doctor is her calling.

Bayley received her Bachelor of Medical Science degree from Western last May. Shortly afterwards she learned about Volunteer Abroad, a Canadian Federation of Students initiative that connects people with not-for-profit organizations, communities and government agencies in need of assistance around the world.

"I applied in July and from there it all happened pretty fast," says Bayley, who had to raise the \$4,000 program fee and \$1,500 airfare before flying off to Peru last October. For the first month she lived with a family in Lima and learned basic Spanish. Then she and two other volunteers were assigned to work in a clinic or posta in Ancahuasi, a small village on the outskirts of Cusco in southern Peru.

Bayley was prepared to be run off her feet, but found the posta had more staff and a lower patient load than she expected. "We were positioned at one of the poorest

stations around Cusco, but because they were so poor they tended not to go to the doctor. When you are fighting to feed your family, taking a day to go to the doctor is sometimes too hard, especially since for some people it was a three- to four-hour walk. Sundays were busier because there was a market. People came down from the mountains and came to the doctor as well."

Still, she did get the hands-on experience she was seeking. "They really just throw you in and let you learn. On the first day we watched an autopsy. I gave some needles, helped stitch up a couple of head wounds, and watched a couple of births."

Bayley has studied anthropology, and was interested in seeing the influence that North America has had on Peru. She found Lima to be the most Americanized part of the country, and not always for the better. "When TV came to Peru, everyone saw this better life and thought they could get it in Lima. There are not enough jobs and Lima is surrounded by shantytowns of poor people who came with nothing, hoping for more. But they ended up with less."

As she travelled to different communities to help vaccinate children at schools and in their homes Bayley saw the destitute conditions that people live in. "You hear of poor people, but it is really different to see it. We take so much for granted in Canada, it's hard for us to understand what true poverty is."

These difficult conditions appeared to influence attitudes toward health. "It was sad because they tended to neglect not just themselves but their children. We met one child whose arm was grotesquely twisted because it had broken over a month before, but no one took him to the doctor. When his parents finally took him to the clinic they were told to go to the hospital in Cusco for surgery, but I don't think they would spend the time or money to get into Cusco."

Before Christmas, when they learned that some children would spend a few nights on the streets in Cusco in hopes of salvaging a toy somewhere, Bayley and the other

volunteers purchased toys for some of the children in the area surrounding the posta. "It was great to see the smiles on their faces," she says.

Bayley's most memorable experience occurred when there were complications with a birth. Riding in the ambulance into Cusco, "I helped the obstetrician get the placenta out of the woman. I'm not sure if this would ever be done in Canada, but it's what we did there."

She was impressed by the cleanliness of the clinic, ("although it was by no means up to our standards, they usually used gloves and cleaned up blood as well as they could"), but found herself questioning how things were done on more than one occasion.

"Most deaths were blamed on sclerosis(thickening or hardening of tissues or arteries) as were most health problems. One time a man came in unconscious. He wasn't breathing and had no pulse. They didn't try to resuscitate him, we basically just watched him die. That was hard. They said it was because he wasn't responding that they didn't do more, but the language barrier prevented us from really understanding what happened that day."

Bayley kept a journal of her experiences, and is interested in comparing her hands-on work at the posta with the formal training she receives in medical school. As for her future, she can see herself making other trips, "but not until I have a few years of medical school under my belt. I know Peru is not as bad as it gets. There are lots of people around the world who need some relief, and I would like to help with that."