

The Manna is Always Enough

By Brooke Balenger and Brandi Pierce

Many people view graduate school as a time of growth and learning, and that statement can certainly be applied to the pharmacy program with all of the ups and downs that go along with it. The moment we receive our white coats for pharmacy school, we know that these upcoming years might be the most challenging years of our lives. We realize that our faith in our Savior, as well as our confidence in our own pharmacy knowledge, will be tested with every stressful exam, late night study session, or potential “bad” grade. The years ahead will hold many opportunities and experiences that will change our hearts and lives forever. Already, the Lord has led us through so many open doors that we never could have imagined possible. One of the greatest of these was a medical mission trip to Changuinola, Panama during the summer of 2018 where Jesus showed us how being His hands and feet can impact so many lives. The two of us, along with a group of amazing individuals, were given the sweet privilege of serving over two thousand patients while also being able to spread the gospel. We were able to see firsthand just how much pharmacy can be used to follow Jesus with a reckless love and abandonment. As we look back on this experience, we see a boldness and fire that we never had before, with a newfound confidence in our Lord for everything He is doing in our lives. This week of adventure was a time where we were given the opportunity to practice pharmacy with a servant heart and experience God’s grace in a way we had never considered before.



The eight-day journey in Changuinola, Panama began with a worship service alongside sixty members of a local church, Primera Iglesia Bautista Fundamental El Buen Pastor. The church lovingly took the entire mission team under its wings. In a small shack without windows or a sturdy roof, the church members and the mission team worshipped the Lord together, with the background noise of local homeless dogs and roosters. We sang in their native tongue, not knowing exactly what we were saying; but we recognized the familiar tunes and we sensed the Holy Spirit’s presence... it was truly a powerful moment for everyone. This humbling worship experience reminded all of us that it is not the appearance of the place we worship, but Who we worship that is important. That afternoon, in between church services, another type of worship suddenly emerged. As we were pre-packaging multivitamins for future clinics, we all broke out into spontaneous worship. All 34 of us, in our hotel’s gymnasium, worshipped our Savior while counting by fives. It was a chain reaction; chills emerged as everyone started to join in. It is in times such as these when we get a better glimpse at the importance of surrounding ourselves with other brothers and sisters in Christ. Experiencing that much love in one room is a

rare occurrence. When a moment like that happens, it is impossible not to partake.

The mission trip was organized through Medical Missions Outreach, a ministry that is focused on “pointing others to the Great Physician” by visiting underdeveloped countries to provide healthcare to those who are in need. Our team consisted of a vision team, a clinical team, and a surgical team. There were a variety of healthcare professionals and students, but the passion and love for Christ were the same in each of our hearts. Our team set up a clinic in a small shelter in Changuinola, graciously loaned to us for four days by the Chiquita Banana Workers Union, with the goal of reaching as many patients as possible with the supplies we had. During the days of serving, our team experienced situations that would forever change our hearts. We had nothing to base our expectations on regarding how the clinic would run, which made the first day a bit overwhelming. We

arrived bright and early to open the clinic at 7:00 am. To our surprise, a line had already begun to form and it wrapped around the building. It was astounding to see the amount of people who were seeking medical care for simple things such as Tylenol® or ibuprofen. These two very popular over-the-counter medications – standard items in every medicine cabinet in the United States – are desperately needed in these underserved populations. The clinic had multiple aspects and there were two lines: one for vision and the other for general medical care. Patients were triaged by gathering their vitals, height, weight, and chief complaint. Providers, MD’s, PA’s, DO’s and trauma nurses prescribed a regimen for each patient (with the help of translators) based on the formulary specific for our trip. A local private school allowed their students to volunteer as translators, since the students were required to spend a certain number of volunteer hours in order to graduate. Our job in the pharmacy was to ensure the medications chosen for each patient were appropriate and accurate; and we also packed a medication bag based on their age. These bags included toothbrushes, toothpaste, multivitamins, and the medications that were prescribed for each patient. Children up to the age of 13 received a homemade hand puppet in the shape of an animal with the words “*Jesus loves me*” across the front. A nurse practitioner and a translator were stationed near the exit of the shelter where patients presented their identification cards and received their medication bag. Our nurse practitioner explained how to properly take their medication. This was essential since most patients were acquiring medications for conditions that had gone untreated for most of their life. At the end of the first day, we served approximately 500 patients and witnessed more than 300 professions of faith.



We came better prepared on the second day: we knew what to expect and how to work more efficiently, which allowed us to be more comfortable and confident with our overall jobs. When we arrived, the line outside the building was twice as long as the day before. Throughout the day, it seemed as though the line never got shorter – people continually came in need of medical attention. Word had spread about our free clinic which resulted in patients visiting from near and far. We later discovered that some patients traveled over twenty miles by foot just to be seen by our vision team. Military officers from the surrounding borders of both Costa Rica and Columbia heard about our clinic and visited in search of a free pair of glasses and medical care. A middle-aged man who needed medical attention and advice had been in a car accident a little over a year ago. He suffered a foot injury after the pedal in his car crushed the dorsal part of his foot, exposing his tendon. A local doctor rewrapped his foot with gauze and bandages every other day because he was required to work on his injured foot in order to support and feed his family. We rewrapped his foot and provided him with extra gauze, triple-antibiotic ointment, an Ace bandage, crutches, and Tylenol®. In the United States, this would be a relatively simple fix, resolved a few weeks or months after the car accident. But in Panama, such an injury causes permanent disability and a lifetime of pain. During this day of clinic, we also ran extremely low on our supply of albendazole, used for the treatment of parasitic worms in stool. Albendazole is the medication of highest demand due to the high rate of parasites amongst the population of Changlinola. The team had to begin rationing this medication, which could have been tragic to patients with severe cases. By the grace of our wonderful and glorious God, a government official came to visit us shortly after the albendazole shortage. (In order for our team to enter the country, a government official has to sign off on our entry; it is common practice for the government official to check on the team and make sure everything is running smoothly). Our team leader told the official about our albendazole crisis...and after making a few phone calls, the official located a supply of albendazole to be donated to our clinic. This was nothing short of a miracle! At the end of the second day we served almost 600 patients and

witnessed more than 300 professions of faith.

During the third and fourth days of clinic, we treated the greatest number of cases: more than 800 patients, with more than half of them providing professions of faith. We were blessed to meet an elderly man who began waiting in line at 2:00 am for our 7:00 am clinic. This reminded the entire team of the daily blessings we receive and how much this small medical clinic can impact patients' lives. We also met a middle-aged male patient who presented with a benign fatty tumor on his head. With God's grace, one of our physicians was able to remove the tumor with no complications. As the clinic days progressed, we were able to interact with patients more as the language barrier became less of a dilemma. The entire pharmacy team became attached to the patients we saw, and one patient even gave a special gift to one of our team members to show appreciation for all we were doing. We were increasingly able to see Christ at work through all the good deeds that were occurring each day.

As we worked in the pharmacy during our time on this mission trip, we both truly began to realize the extent of what our service was doing for the people of Changuinola. It was amazing to see how something so simple can create so much contentment in a grateful heart. Looking back at that week, we are reminded of the story of the Manna in Exodus and Numbers. As the exiles from Egypt were making their way through the desert the Lord "rained down manna for the people to eat, he gave them the grains of heaven. Human beings ate the bread of angels; he sent them all the food they could eat" (Psalms 78:24-25, NIV). The manna "tasted like wafers made of honey" (Exodus 16:31, NIV). After being immensely blessed with food from heaven, the Israelites were lusting after things the Lord had not provided. "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost – also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!" (Numbers 11:6, NIV). As we thought about this story in the Bible, it is so clear to us that they were blessed beyond measure, why is it so hard for us to see our own blessings? In today's culture, lust is usually considered a sexual yearning, but the Bible defines it much broader than that: lust is a strong desire for something or someone, or to be somewhere else. Simply put, lust is desiring something that God has not provided for you – and therefore you do not trust in His perfect plan and you think you know more than the Almighty. This can cause us to have a distorted view of our blessings and cause us to become ungrateful. Eight days in Changuinola, Panama gave us an entirely new perspective on what it means to be content with what we have, and to trust God to provide for our every need. Through times like this, we need to always remember that no matter what, God never changes and the manna never changes.

"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength." (Philippians 4:11b-13, NIV)