

Improving Community Health in Rural Colombia



As part of KP's Global Health Program, Sandra Torrente, MD, (above) trains traditional birth attendants in the most medically underserved area of Colombia.

By Dolores Radding

Three Kaiser Permanente physicians traveled to Choco, Colombia last month as part of Kaiser Permanente's growing Global Health Program. Their goals were twofold: Develop a needs assessment for the possibility of developing an ongoing KP Global Health Program there, and conduct a 5-day training class for 75 traditional birth attendants.

KP Global Health Program Director Hernando Garzon, MD, was invited to Choco by a local nonprofit. Choco is one of the most medically underserved areas of Colombia, with a high rate of still births. Choco's capital, Quibdó, has 2 hospitals, but there are no hospitals in the surrounding areas, where hundreds of thousands of people live—so many babies are delivered by traditional birth attendants.

"It can be a 2- to 3-day journey to get to a hospital," Dr. Garzon said. "This is dense tropical jungle, where people travel by river because there are almost no roads."

The KP Global Health program was launched in 2008 to support and promote community service and volunteerism for physicians and residents. Its mission is to serve medically underserved areas of the world while providing global health experiences for KP staff physicians and residents. Over the years, the program has sent nearly 200 residents and staff volunteers to serve with its 8 partner medical programs around the world in regions including Africa, Asia, and Central America.

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Training Traditional Birth Attendants

Dr. Garzon was joined in Choco by KP San Francisco ob-gyn Sandra Torrente, MD, and KP Santa Clara ob-gyn resident Rebecca Falik, MD. Dr. Torrente is Colombian, and all 3 physicians are fluent in Spanish.



Rebecca Falik, MD, Hernando Garzon, MD, and Sandra Torrente, MD, in Choco. Photos courtesy of Elisa Casas.

Drs. Torrente and Falik developed and led the 5-day course to train traditional birth attendants in basics such as creating a clean birth environment, and recognizing the signs and symptoms of emergencies such as hemorrhage and preeclampsia. One important goal was to encourage the transfer of emergency patients to hospitals in Quibdo.

The physicians collected donations before they left, and brought 500 clean birth kits with essentials such as a scalpel, strings to tie the umbilical cord, a receiving blanket for the baby, a bar of soap, and rubber gloves. They also showed the women how to make the kits for themselves.

There was wide range of skill levels among the attendants. Some were indigenous, and did not speak much Spanish; others couldn't read.

"One woman had attended 7,000 births and had 2 years of nurse training, but she brought her daughter who was not skilled because she wanted her to have more formal training," Dr. Torrente said.

'It Gives You That Booster Shot'

Dr. Torrente said the lure of Global Health work was one of the reasons she joined KP San Francisco 3 years ago.

"Having these experiences makes me a better doctor because it reminds me of why I went into medicine. It gives you that booster shot to continue to do the day-to-day work at KP," she said.

Dr. Falik, who puts in 65- to 80-hour weeks as a resident, said the work in Colombia left her feeling reinvigorated and reconnected to the cause of women's health around the world.



Rebecca Falik, MD, looks on during the training of traditional birth attendants.

"I feel the passion for this work, because there is such a need," Dr. Falik said. "Even some of the most basic improvements in women's health can help save lives."