

10 Days in Nicaragua

10,000 Patients Treated



"Are we really making a difference?" Eisenhower Medical Center Cardiologists Melvin Gonzalez, MD, and Khôi Lê, MD and Internist Carlos Lopez, MD pondered this question during their recent International Medical Alliance (IMA) mission trip to Esteli, Nicaragua as they surveyed the daily sea of people waiting for hours in long lines to see a doctor. Many had traveled by foot, burro and bus from different parts of the country as well as neighboring Honduras.

Dr. Gonzalez, Dr. Lê and Dr. Lopez were part of IMA's volunteer team of 80 doctors and surgeons, plus dentists, nurses, pharmacists and support staff from across the United States on the 10-day mission to Esteli in August 2011.

Packing an echocardiograph and electrocardiograph (EKG) in his suitcase, Dr. Gonzalez joined his fellow Eisenhower physicians in setting up an internal medicine and cardiology clinic where they performed evaluations for heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, infections and lung problems, and prescribed medications for up to 80 patients daily.

The visiting doctors soon discovered that one of the country's biggest health challenges is access. Even in a growing and progressive city like Esteli, the third largest city in Nicaragua with a population of approximately 119,000, obtaining ongoing medical attention and medications can be extremely difficult — especially for rural residents and the poor. In spite of those challenges, the Eisenhower physicians were able to provide diagnoses, medical information, suggested lifestyle changes and a 30-day supply of medications to help minimize the risks of certain diseases. "The number of people without any health care is really astounding," notes Dr. Lopez. "A lot of our patients had never seen a doctor."

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—Dr. Gonzalez

Despite the high volume of patients (nearly 10,000 patients were treated), challenging conditions, long hours and sometimes discouraging prognoses for patients, Drs. Gonzalez, Lê and Lopez left the trip immensely gratified for each person whose life they were able to improve or lengthen. "Every day we saw one or two cases that really touched us," says Dr. Lê, such as a young pregnant woman who came to the physicians with a heart murmur and rapid heartbeat. After using the ultrasound to check her heart, the doctors rubbed it over her belly so she could see her baby's heart beating.

Dr. Gonzalez and Dr. Lopez enjoyed the added pleasure of sharing this experience with loved ones — Dr. Gonzalez with his 20-year-old daughter, a pre-med student, and Dr. Lopez with his two teenage daughters. The experience further fueled each young woman's resolve to become a doctor. "They can see that we're using our skills and hands to positively influence life," says Dr. Gonzalez. "It has to come from your soul."

The doctors look forward to future mission trips and encourage anyone wishing to positively impact other people's lives to get involved. Doctors represent only one-quarter of mission volunteers. The balance of the team also play vital roles and are greatly needed.