

Kansas-Paraguay Partnership – A new twist!

Steve Penner, MD, Volunteer Faculty, Family and Community Medicine, University of Kansas School of Medicine – Wichita, and national AAFP volunteer teacher of the year a few years ago, was asked to travel to Paraguay to educate the Paraguayans about community-based education. Upon his return, Dr. Penner filed the following report.



Dr. Penner with faculty member (woman in center) and residents in Encarnación.

About 1 1/2 years ago, I was asked to consider going to Paraguay to obtain a better sense of what medicine, and, in particular, Family Medicine is like in Paraguay. Because of work and family responsibilities, I delayed going for a year. On August 17, 2008, I left for Paraguay with a travel grant from Kansas-Paraguay Partnership, an organization under Partners of the Americas located in Washington, DC.

One might ask, "Why the interest in Paraguay?" From a national standpoint, Paraguay has

a stable democracy in a region with some political concern (recent events in Venezuela, for instance). Paraguay is important to Kansas as well. Not only are there economic and educational ties between our state and the country of Paraguay (Paraguayan students coming to Kansas are eligible to receive in-state tuition at many of our colleges and universities), but many in Kansas, particularly those of Mennonite background, have family ties to Paraguay. Over the last century, many Mennonites left Russia because of religious persecution and immigrated to Canada, the U.S. and a number of countries in Central and South America, including a large number of immigrants to Paraguay.

My interest in Paraguay comes from my Mennonite background. My father was a young boy when his family was forced to leave their home in the Ukraine. My grandfather was a Mennonite pastor and was a prosperous landowner – both unfavorably looked upon when the Communists came into power. The family, therefore, along with many other Mennonites, hurriedly left Russia in the late 1920's and immigrated to Paraguay. My mother's family was also part of the movement of Mennonites out of Russia and into Paraguay. Mother was born in Paraguay after her fam-

ily's arrival. Books are written about the hardships the Mennonites encountered as they pioneered their way across Paraguay to finally settle in the interior of the country. Many died along the way from malnourishment and malaria, including my grandfather.



Dr. Wesley Schmidt at the entrance to his Family Medicine Clinic in Asunción

My parents received scholarships to attend Tabor College in Hillsborough, Kansas, as foreign students. There they met, dated and married. After graduation, my father studied for his doctorate degree at Wichita State University. While he was in Wichita, I was born at Wesley Hospital. After my birth, we moved back to Paraguay. At age six, my family and I returned to Kansas, where I have lived since. The August trip to Paraguay was the first time that I have traveled back in 47 years!

Two of my cousins in Paraguay have been involved in the national government there. Werner Thielmann has had

various governmental responsibilities, most recently having completed a term as Legislator of Paraguay's largest department, or state, Boqueron. Another cousin, Orlando Penner, now has the same legislative position. It was interesting how many people knew Orlando, not because of his governmental position, but because of his multiple past national championships in motorcycle and automobile racing! I learned much by hearing about the national healthcare concerns from the government's perspective.

During my first days in Paraguay, I had the privilege of attending the National Congress of Family Medicine, only the second nationwide gathering ever of Family Medicine physicians! The day prior to the Congress was the most interesting for me – a day of meetings with almost a hundred residents from most of the Family Medicine residencies in Paraguay. They came together to compare the strengths and weakness of their own programs, discuss mutual problems and concerns as well as discuss how to proceed with finding ways to better their residencies. Concerns ranged from lack of any supervision of the residents at several of the programs to no libraries/internet access to some residents not having a Family Medicine "home" within the hospital in

which they are working. Standards for what defines a Family Physician and a Family Medicine Residency are not yet clarified in Paraguay. The issues of credentialing and re-credentialing are just now seriously being considered. The experience gave me a great appreciation for the work that our AAFP has done since its formation for all its Academy members. I also came away from the conference with an admiration for the Paraguayan Family Physician leaders such as Dr. Wesley Schmidt, as they work to define their specialty' and stay determined to persevere no matter the obstacles faced. Dr. Schmidt has worked extensively for many years with one of the Family Physician residency programs in Asunción, Paraguay's capital city.

In many ways, my specialty is in its adolescence in Paraguay – residencies are turning out Family Physicians with various levels of competency due to a lack of recognized competency standards, and the Paraguayan population is not quite sure of exactly what medical care a Family Physician is able to provide. Specialties, such as pediatrics, are having to make adjustments, realizing that, while there may be some competition for patients, Paraguay's primary care needs are extensive. Paraguay is also grappling with the

issue of providing health care to its population. The new National Health Minister, in her address to the Family Medicine Congress, assured the audience of the prominent place Family Medicine will have in alleviating Paraguay's health care needs, particularly in the rural areas. Compounding the difficulty in developing a national health care plan is Paraguay being one of the poorest countries in South America.

I had the opportunity of visiting many hospitals, clinics and residencies during my two weeks traveling in Paraguay. In Asunción, I met Dr. Enrique de Mestral as well as Dr. Andres Szwako. Besides leading one of Paraguay's foremost Family Medicine residency programs, the two physicians have just published Paraguay's first Family Medicine textbook. A signed copy of the book was given to me by the authors.



Drs. De Mestral and Szwako with their Family Medicine Residents.