

Alumni Gifts Fund Student Trip to Ethiopia



In May, a group of eight medical students traveled on a three-week medical mission trip from San Antonio to Aleta Wondo, a town in southern Ethiopia located about eight hours by bus from the nation's capital, Addis Ababa. The group included Allison Price, Kelsey Bryant, Elizabeth Levine, Courtney Wiener, Bilal Dar, Shah Kahn, John Anhalt, and John Doehring. Made possible in part by a \$5,000 gift from the Alumni Association's Student Education Enhancement

Fund, the experience was part of the Global Health Elective offered by the Center for Medical Humanities & Ethic at the Health Science Center. The trip illustrates the growing collaborative partnership between School of Medicine alumni and students to make lives better throughout the world.

The students' primary mission was to provide physicals for and treat various conditions of 300 staff members and students at Common River, a school in Aleta Wondo. After completing the initial exams for everyone at the school, including the women in the afternoon women's literacy class, the students spent two days at a clinic in the town where they treated as many people as possible each day. At both Common River and the clinic, the students broke into groups to maximize the amount of work they could accomplish. Most days, two students worked on triage, four students worked with doctors, and another two students filled the prescriptions in a mobile "pharmacy." The students also hired three translators who were skilled at speaking both English and Amharic, and these assistants proved to be integral to the overall success of the trip.

"The two primary conditions we saw were intestinal worms and trachoma," said Allison Price. "Even if the patients were not presenting with symptoms for intestinal worms, we went ahead and treated everyone with albendazole because this problem is so prevalent in Aleta Wondo. As for trachoma, we learned to diagnose it in the early stages by flipping patients' eyelids and looking for the diagnostic white inflammatory bumps and/or in-turned eyelashes on their lids. For patients presenting with trachoma, we provided a one-time dose of azithromycin, and this treatment was not only curative, but also prevented blindness caused by advanced stages of trachoma."

The medical students also had the opportunity to treat a number of other conditions. After the students removed a cyst from one man's lip, the patient remarked that it was the first time he had been able to smile in six years. In another instance, they helped diagnose a sick baby boy with potential meningitis and get him admitted to the local hospital to make sure he received the antibiotics he needed. They also treated a few systemic infections and were able to follow up with the patients the next day to see drastic improvements.

During the second week in Aleta Wondo, the team of students conducted a public health survey to assess the public's knowledge in the areas of water, hygiene, and sanitation. They split into groups and walked from home to home to ask questions as well as make observations about the type of measures residents were taking to maintain their health. The survey data is in the process of being analyzed, and the medical students will unveil their findings at a presentation on campus in September. In addition, drawing upon some of the funds for the trip that they had raised through bake sales and other activities on campus, the students bought a new pair of shoes for each of the more than 100 women in the adult women's evening classes. "We had the opportunity to participate in the ceremony where each woman was presented with her new shoes," Price said. "And it was humbling to see how grateful these women were for something as simple as a sturdy pair of shoes."

As is the case with many student groups traveling on medical mission trips to impoverished regions of the world, the medical students wondered about the long-term benefits of their work. "The experience proved to be an emotional rollercoaster, as we considered if we were doing any real and permanent good for the residents of Aleta Wondo," Price remarked. "While many of the infections and diseases we treated will likely come back in the future, we had the opportunity to improve our patients' standard of living, if only for a little while. We also hope that we were able to instill knowledge in the residents of Aleta Wondo that there are people in the world who do care and who want to help. For all of the students, the experience renewed our passion to become physicians who can use our degrees to help those less fortunate than ourselves. It also showed us firsthand the responsibility we have as physicians to help *all* people, not just those who are able to pay, who come into our clinic, or who are the most convenient to treat."