

Chiropractic at 11,000 Feet -- The Flying Doctors of America

James Schantz, DC

James Schantz, DC, adjusting a Quechua Indian in Chinchaypujio, Peru.

As I cradle the old woman's head in my hands, I stare down at the lines and creases coursing over her brow. Here lies a woman who is a direct descendant of a great ancient civilization, the Inca empire, and she is entrusting me, the American doctor, to rid her of the headaches that plague her life. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. The air is thin, and even simple movements can take concerted effort. I feel a connection through the centuries as I focus on massaging her occipital ridge. Never before have I experienced such a transcendental feeling working with a patient. Gently, I rotate her head to the right, and with precision and speed adjust her atlas. Her eyes widen with surprise. I quickly thrust to the left to complete her upper cervical treatment. A smile begins to smooth her cracked lips and brighten her stoic face. At least one soul in this mountain village will sleep better tonight, thanks to the Flying Doctors of America.

Based in Atlanta, Georgia, Flying Doctors of America is the brainchild of a nonconformist, ex-fundamentalist ordained minister, Allan Gathercoal. Allan believes that compassion, love and mercy are the three driving elements that bring us closer to God. To put these elements in action, Flying Doctors of America (FDOA) was created. This nonprofit organization operates primarily with a volunteer staff and board of directors to provide health care services to needy people in Third World countries. Since 1990, over 60 missions have been run to Latin America and Asia, using volunteer medical doctors, surgeons, dentists, nurses, college students, and chiropractors.

FDOA is one of the few relief organizations that recognizes the therapeutic value of chiropractic care, and actively recruits chiropractic doctors to participate in their missions. From all over the U.S., volunteers donate their time, skills, and resources to spend anywhere from one to two weeks traveling abroad to remote villages that have little or no access to health care. FDOA headquarters selects destinations that are impoverished, but are also within reach of enticing sightseeing or adventure travel activities, such as white water rafting.

The combination of service to humanity and exotic travel in a manageable time frame for today's busy professional has made FDOA attractive to the altruistic, yet practically-minded doctor. I got hooked because I received a fax from FDOA headquarters on upcoming missions last winter. Some big changes had gone on in my life in the past year, and I felt like I wanted to give something back to the world. When I saw an eight-day mission to Peru, with a side trip to Machu Picchu, the world-famous Inca ruins, coinciding with Labor Day, I knew it was a message from above. Since I was a little kid, I wanted to visit Machu Picchu; now I could go there and help others while doing chiropractic, my chosen profession.

My passion was ignited. I swung into action completing my application. I hoped I was worthy in the eyes of the FDOA to serve. In a few weeks I got my ok and started fundraising to help pay my expenses. Volunteering doesn't mean you get to go for free; it just means you don't get paid. I was fortunate, because a number of companies, groups, friends, and relatives pitched in to help.

Special thanks to Roswell East Rotary Club, PhytoPharmica, Dee Cee Labs, ImageTek, Continental S.E.L., Medical Arts Press, and Power Foods for their Power Bar supply. Two local chiropractors, Dr. David Pellington in Roswell, and Dr. Ron Tucker of Atlanta, donated their time to treat my patients in Roswell while I was gone, which was an honorable act on both their parts.

Late Friday night on August 30th, our group gathered for the first time at Miami International Airport. We hailed from Georgia, Florida, New York, Chicago, and Arizona. Represented were the fields of dentistry; ophthalmology; internal medicine; physical therapy; family therapy; chiropractic; nursing; pharmacy; and photography. Although few of us had ever met, our common mission brought an immediate sense of closeness. This feeling helped fuel us through the long hours, strenuous living conditions, schedule changes, and surprises that one must expect in Latin America.

Eight hours later, we arrived in Cusco, Peru, the oldest continuously inhabited city in South America. Cusco is like Katmandu in Nepal. Both cities attract thousands of travelers who come to experience an age-old culture that is very different from the 20th-century Western way of life. Cusco is the archaeological capital of the Americas. Massive Inca stone walls line most of Cusco's central streets and form foundations of colonial and modern buildings. In Quechua, the language of present-day Inca descendants, Cusco means "navel of the Earth." Our overnight travel and current altitude of 11,000 feet spelled headache and nap time for me. While others chewed coca leaves and explored Cusco, I slept to gather my reserves.

That afternoon, we were introduced to a group of local señoritas called Amistad y Cultura (friends and culture). These young, single women, many of them college educated, were our escorts, dining companions, clinic helpers, and translators during our stay in Peru. The next morning, we boarded a bus provided by our Peruvian outfitters, Andean Treks.

Up into the mountains we ascended. Vistas of snowy peaks and llamas grazing on mountain grasses unfolded before us as we neared our destination, the village of Chinchaypujio. This small, rural community was stuck on the side of the mountain, isolated from the rest of the world: no phones, no T.V., no cars. The people lived very simply: a small garden, a few goats or pigs, houses of mud and straw. There were a few things that looked out of place. I could always find a kid eating a Popsicle, but I never saw a freezer or refrigerator. The main streets were unpaved, but there were new overhead street lights. The town had a medical clinic, but no drugs to dispense.

After getting settled in our tent village, we divided into specialty centers. I was a little uneasy about working with a physical therapist, because I've heard that they can be more prejudiced than MDs when it comes to chiropractic. There was no problem working together in our physical medicine center. We each treated patients with our own individual approach and asked each other's help when the patients needed it. We were kept busy at our makeshift office in the town's community center.

Our specialty centers were separated by shower curtains clipped to ropes we strung about the room. Outside droves of men, women, and children assembled waiting to see us. They were screened through our triage center. The triage doctors attempted to take their histories and chief complaints, so that they could direct them to the proper providers. One of the young women who performed triage was originally puzzled about the presence of a chiropractor on our mission. She quickly learned how useful we can be, as scores of villagers complained of headaches, neck pain, back pain, and my favorite complaint: "I hurt all over."

Being outside the confines of the United States, it was liberating to be able to practice without the confines of scope-of-practice laws. I was able to use my postgraduate training in acupuncture and

dispense small amounts of pharmaceuticals when appropriate. None of us worried about S.O.A.P. notes, pre-authorization for treatment, or deductibles. This was the fun part of the practice, without the hassles.

Over the course of four days, I helped care for about 400 people, including Quechua Indians from the town and outlying locations; our own staff, many of whom had never received an adjustment before; and our Amistad y Cultura señoritas and their families. One of the highlights for me was working for part of the day with Jose, the local Quechuan healer. He used massage and manipulation along with herbs and prayers. We co-treated a number of patients together, and worked on each other too.

By the end of our four days, I was filled with good feelings, and in dire need of a hot shower. Our trip was a Grade III on the I to IV FDOA rating scale. As the grade increases, the level of personal comfort and bathroom facilities decreases.

On the bus ride back to Cusco, I felt very emotional. Our brief stay in Chinchaypucjio made me realize first-hand the enormous poverty that exists in the world. I thought about my family and how well off they were in the United States. I was very thankful for being able to provide some help, and thought of ways that I could volunteer my chiropractic services to the poor in Atlanta. Visiting the Inca ruins of Machu Picchu was no longer the object of my desire. It had been overshadowed by the enormous sense of gratitude and love from the work with the people of Chinchaypucjio.

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For further information on how you can participate in or support Flying Doctors of America missions, contact F.D.O.A. at (770) 451-3068, or Dr. Jamie Schantz at (770) 993-9287.

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