

Care in Airplane Mode

Category: Across Borders and Cultures

written by William Sperduto | May 2, 2017

Airplane mode disables me from using Wi-Fi and enables me to provide distraction-free care to the patients in front of me. Truly disconnecting is difficult, but being in rural Honduras allows me to switch my phone settings with ease. My otoscope and ophthalmoscope cannot see texts and emails. My stethoscope cannot hear incoming calls. My hands cannot feel my iPhone screen. I am in tune with my body, my senses and my patient.

Soft spoken, rapidly speaking abuelas (grandmothers) demand my full attention. Using medical Spanish for the first time encourages me to pause, clarify and summarize. At times, embracing the intimate notion of personal space in Central America, I listen no more than a foot away from my patient's face. I am thankful for the opportunity to rely on my instincts and teammate's opinions and to refine my clinical decision-making skills. Instead of depending on scans and lab results, I trust myself and have confidence in what I know.

With a background in global health and cultural anthropology, I am mindful of how often well-intentioned, short-term medical outreach trips fail and leave the community no better or worse. Especially in a resource-limited community, I accept the diseases I cannot cure and illnesses I can only temporarily treat. I am dissatisfied with the extent to which I can help, but the smiles and blessings I receive reassure me that this work is worthwhile and remind me why our team is in the second poorest community in Honduras. For these ten days, I can glean an awareness of the deeply rooted determinants of health. I can embolden people to feel responsible for their own health. I can bring people confidence in visiting their local health clinic. And, I can humbly recognize our efforts as the beginning of developing a sustainable solution.

With this experience, I internalize a certain lopsidedness – I will take away more than I was able to give, but I can transform this selfish realization into a positive, guiding force that will translate into how I care for patients back home. By working with an interdisciplinary team, I further appreciate the collaborative dynamic that meaningful care requires. By learning to work in airplane mode, I am better able to disconnect from distractions to keep my patients the focus of my care.

Will Sperduto

Wayzata, Minnesota