

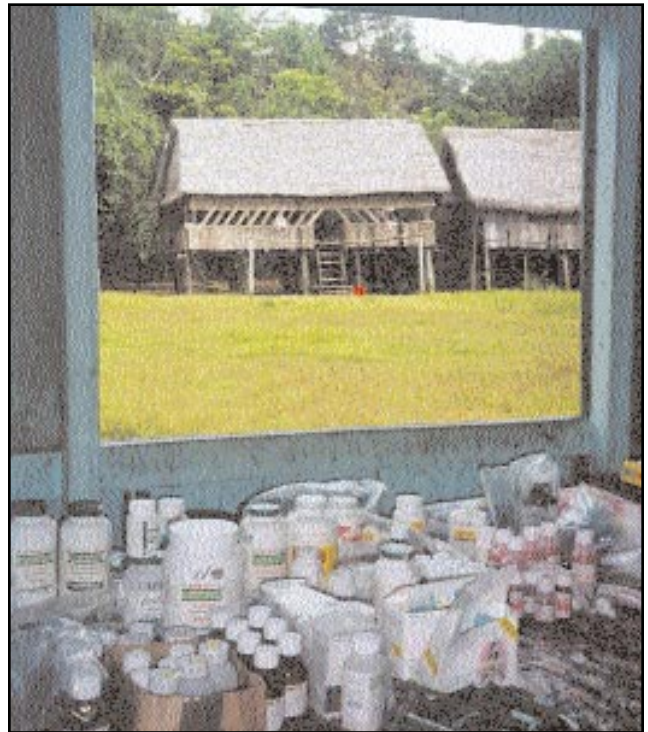
Rainforest Health Project

Beth Sproule

In our most recent federal election, in November 2000, there was some discussion of the future of health care in Canada, including the possibility of a “two-tiered system” and its effect on universal access, a hallmark of the Canadian system. In 2001, our front cover features pictures to illustrate the stories of Canadians who have volunteered or worked in health care in other countries.

While I finished dispensing another prescription, a welcome breeze had me glancing up to find 3 grinning faces intently watching me at work through the open window. As I put the handwritten prescription label on the little resealable bag containing a few tablets and looked around for a Spanish translator to help me with my patient counselling, I knew I was far from home. The “pharmacy” was actually a table in one corner of a schoolhouse in a remote village in the Peruvian Amazon, which had been converted for the day into a medical clinic. At the other end of the room a couple of tables were curtained off to serve as examination areas for the volunteer physicians, and in another corner the local shaman was seeing patients, providing advice and dispensing various local plants and roots. And all around these makeshift workstations were many, many people! Whole families were moving around together as each person had his or her medical concerns addressed, and of course there were the many curious onlookers.

All this took place a few years ago, when I had the opportunity to volunteer for the Rainforest Health Project, a nonprofit, international relief organization providing humanitarian medical assistance in Peru. Four



In 1996, Beth Sproule, currently a Researcher in the Psychopharmacology Research Program at Sunnybrook and Women's College Health Sciences Centre in Toronto, Ontario, travelled to the Peruvian Amazon as a pharmacist volunteer with the Rainforest Health Project. This picture shows the table that was used as the pharmacy in a converted schoolhouse on one of the daily trips to a remote village. Through the window can be seen 2 of the local homes, which are built on stilts to accommodate the regular flooding of the nearby rivers.

times a year, volunteer teams of medical professionals travel to villages in the Peruvian jungle that have asked for the Project's assistance. Basic medical care is provided, and sustainable health practices are encouraged. To do this, the teams work with area shamans; learn about local traditions of healing, including the use of medicinal plants; and teach (by example) safer waste removal, water supply management, and nutrition. My medical team included 3 physicians, 4 nurses, 1 lab technician, 7 nonmedical people, and myself as the pharmacist. Our trip lasted 2 weeks, during which time we flew from Miami to Iquitos in northern Peru, then travelled by boat up the Amazon River and a smaller tributary to the jungle lodge

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that served as our base. From there, we travelled by river and through the jungle to reach remote communities. My contributions were organizing the many bags and boxes of medications, identifying donated drug products from various countries, selecting appropriate drugs and dosages for patients from what was available, dispensing medications, providing drug information through an interpreter, and identifying the pharmacy needs for the next trip. I was also able to learn from the local shamans about the medicinal plants they use in their practice. For example, *ayahuasca* is a hallucinogen used in healing ceremonies, and the bark from *una de gato* (also known as cat's claw) is used to make a tea for infections and cancer.

The trip was a wonderful experience—we were able to provide a basic service to people in need, and

the experience confirmed for me the unique contributions that pharmacists can make to these medical teams. More information about the Rainforest Health Project can be found at their Web site (<http://www.rainforesthealth.org>). I have compiled a small Web site with information about pharmacists volunteering or working overseas (<http://www3.sympatico.ca/bethsproule>). If you have information or experiences you would like to share with other pharmacists, please let me know so I can add your contribution to the site.

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