Asturias Ministry of Health

With the support of the LACIS internship grant, I spent my first several post-graduation months in northern Spain with the health department of Asturias (one of the seventeen Spanish autonomous communities). The University of Wisconsin has an important partnership with the Asturias Consejería de Sanidad y Servicios Sanitarios (roughly translated to Asturias Ministry of Health), as the County Health Rankings methodology pioneered by our Population Health Institute was implemented there and is being utilized for the first time outside of the United States as the Health Observatory of Asturias (Observatorio de Salud en Asturias, or OBSA). I was the first student to participate in educational exchange between the two entities and with the help of my public and global health professor Lori DiPrete-Brown and Dr. Rafael Cofiño, Chief of Population Health Services in Asturias, I was able to create a meaningful internship experience.

I spent the first month of my internship in a non-clinical medical residency rotation in Community Health. I rotated with four Family and Community Medicine residents who came from different areas in Spain. We spent several weeks at the department offices learning about OBSA and various public health programs ranging from oral health to breast cancer screening. We also completed a three-day course and certification in Community Health, which included participatory learning with case studies, a deep look into social determinants of health, and presentations of the health situation in our own “health zones” (I presented Dane County). We also attended a large conference on Observation in Health.

To round out the rotation, we went into the community and rotated through different associations and organizations. These and the people who keep them going are true health community health assets and a look inside them allowed me real-life insight into work on “the causes of the causes” of health problems. This experience really strengthened my belief that important work in the health field is not always medical. The organizations we spent time with were fantastic and deal with everything from health promotion to safe sexual practices. Some examples include the Fundación SILOE, which manages a shelter for AIDS patients and a day center supporting at-risk populations, and the Alfalar Cultural Center, a safe place for children and adults alike to learn and grow with a system in place for exchange of goods and services that was truly amazing.

As I said goodbye to the residents whose rotation was only four weeks, I moved on to shadow Dr. Begoña Dominguez, an experienced pediatrician and the president of AEPap, the Spanish Association for Primary Care Pediatrics. She taught me interview techniques to collect good patient histories and introduced me to her public health research, which investigates daycare attendance and viral infection, childhood obesity,
and asthma to name a few. I translated some of her research findings from Spanish to English for her to present at the European Pediatrics Conference in Turkey. I also introduced her to OBSA and some of the health outcomes and factors it measures. Another truly meaningful part of my days in pediatrics was a firsthand look into the Spanish universal health system: people from all socioeconomic levels brought their children to Begoña, and all free of charge. Every child in Asturias is provided with the same care and included in the public health initiative “Healthy Child Program” to track their health and development.

More highlights of my experience included courses in Web 2.0 and Qualitative Investigation, a tour of the University of Oviedo hospital, and exploration of health in Gijón with a professor of anthropology. I met with another university professor who teaches epidemiology to healthcare students; I sat in on a class, learned about his research and introduced him to OBSA, which he plans to integrate into his classes next year. I also spent time learning about sexual education in schools and was able to sit in on a class for seventh graders given by a sexologist. This is one aspect of health education that is very different in the United States and the emphasis on sexuality as well as safety was both new for me and seems to be highly effective. Other unique initiatives for sexual health in Asturias include a confidential and anonymous WhatsApp program all young people can use to ask any questions they might have relating to sex or sexuality, which is a great public health example in the use of technology.

I spent the last portion of my internship experience back at the department offices. During these weeks I was able to do some work for the Consejería. I created English subtitles for an OBSA introductory video and translated several OBSA materials from Spanish to English. This will help the department to have broader capacity for outreach. I also spent time working on the OBSA health asset database. Different organizations, associations, clinics, etc can submit initiatives and these are made available to the public online. I organized these by methodology, target population, key words, and health determinants to make the database more searchable and specific for citizens. In addition, I searched for contact information and yearly program evaluations to post along with the descriptions of the health asset. This was a great experience as well; many of the associations were the same ones I had spend time with earlier and it was rewarding to be a part of their community outreach.

These are several examples of the many activities I was able to participate in during my stay in Asturias. I cannot say enough about the brilliant professionals I worked with there or how much I learned from them. I do hope that our partnership grows and that after me, many more students will travel from Wisconsin to Asturias- and vice versa. I know I came out of the experience even more passionate about work in the social determinants of health in addition to medicine and increasing access to health care in my own country. I also feel more capable to do so. I would not have been able to go forward with this honestly life-changing experience without the internship grant from the Latin American, Iberian and Caribbean Studies Program, and for that I am forever grateful. Thank you LACIS!