

International Insight

Childhood Cancer Treatment In Honduras

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Located in Central America, Honduras is one of the poorest countries in the world. On a scale from zero to one, the country has a 0.667% rating on the Human Development Index (HDI)—a summary composite index that measures a country's average achievements in three basic aspects of human development: health, knowledge, and a decent standard of living. Although the main priority of the Honduran government's Health Department is to focus on infection control of malaria and dengue fever, as well as malnutrition, vaccination, and natural disasters, the government is unable to fully support the treatment of childhood cancer because of the country's substandard development and quality of life.

The Pediatric Oncology Unit of Honduras' main public hospital, Hospital Escuela ("teaching hospital"), has undertaken this issue with support from various outlets. The unit, which began in 1989 as a small room with only 15 beds, lacked a proper supply of medications. Furthermore, children diagnosed with oncologic illnesses often had to be sent home with palliative treatment and/or had high mortality rates because of infections and poor support care. However, collaboration between Hospital Escuela and the nonprofit organization Honduras Foundation for Children with Cancer (HFCC), and with fundraising efforts throughout the Honduran community, the unit was provided with much-needed support—medications, improvement of the hospital's facilities, implementation of radiological studies, and collaboration with other international organizations. The institution currently holds 2,000 beds, and in addition to the Pediatric Oncology Unit, also has spe-

cialty units in gynecologic-obstetrics, surgery, and internal medicine.

In 1998, Professor Giuseppe Masera, MD, founder of the Monza International School of Pediatric Hematology-Oncology (MISPHO), organized a meeting of pediatric oncologists from developing Latin American countries and experts in the field from Italy, the United States, and Canada. Dr. Masera's initiative enabled attendees to exchange experiences with experts and request support. The meeting resulted in the creation of Asociación de Hemato-Oncología Pediátrica Centroamericana (AHOPCA), a Central American regional consortium of pediatric oncologists who follow protocols of treatment for the most frequent pediatric cancers with direct advice taken from experts in childhood cancer.

In 2000, Honduras was accepted as a St. Jude International Outreach Program (IOP) partner site. The mission of the IOP is "to improve the survival rates of children with cancer and other catastrophic illnesses worldwide, through the sharing of knowledge, technology and organizational skills," according to the St. Jude website. Furthermore, "the IOP Strategic Plan provides the roadmap for guiding efforts and activities to facilitate capacity building of human capital, infrastructure and sustainability at international partner sites for the next five years."

Since the program's inception in Honduras, developments in the area have included the presence of full-time specialists in the Pediatric

Unit at Hospital Escuela, as well as training programs for nurses in the Pediatric Oncology Nursing School, computers and internet access, educational visits from St. Jude specialists, online lectures, and implementation of a complete pediatric oncology networked database (POND). POND is a multilingual clinical database that supports pediatric hematology/oncology treatment protocols. The tool allows uniform data collection so treatment protocols and outcomes can be meaningfully compared between treatment centers.

In 2003, the nonprofit organization Pediatric Oncology Group of Ontario (POGO), supported Hospital Escuela's Pediatric



TOP: Staff from the Pediatric Oncology Unit at Hospital Escuela. *From left to right:* Graciela Flores, the ward's psychologist; Blanca Maradiaga, Chief of Nurses; Carolina Arambu, MD; Ligia Fu, MD; Armando Pena, MD; Rafael Barahona, MD; Ricardo Lopez, MD. **MIDDLE:** A view of Hospital Escuela, which is the tertiary-level hospital located in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. **BOTTOM:** Children who are in remission after receiving treatment for acute lymphoblastic leukemia at the Pediatric Oncology Unit. They are wearing t-shirts with the logo for La Fundación Hondureña para el Niño con Cáncer, the local foundation that helped with their treatment.

Oncology Unit by providing salaries to data managers. The hospital was able to capture demographic, diagnostic, and key treatment information for all cases of childhood cancer, and track late effects and long-term follow-up services. With 300 new cases of childhood cancer diagnosed in Hospital Escuela each year—the most frequent diagnosis being acute lymphoblast leukemia, followed by lymphoma and brain tumors—it is now possible to report that survival rate of lymphoblastic leukemia in the Pediatric Oncology Unit has increased from 30% to 60%.

Finally, the 2005 initiative, “My Child Matters” (MCM), headed by the International Union Against Cancer (UICC) and Sanofi Aventis, resulted in the opening of two satellite clinics in Honduras to help battle abandonment of childhood cancer treatment. More specifically, the Pediatric Oncology team of Hospital

Escuela had detected in 2000 that the abandonment of cancer treatment was close to 37% for the region. Once a child was diagnosed and started treatment, the child’s family was often unlikely to come back for continued treatment because of socioeconomic limitations.

The presence of satellite clinics has since expanded even further and Honduras currently has four satellite clinics—two units each for diagnosis and childhood cancer treatment in the main cities of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula.

The development of pediatric cancer treatment in Honduras shows that it is possible to cure children with cancer in developing countries through hard work and willingness of a devoted oncology team, and support from local governments, foundations, and the international community.

Society Launches New International Volunteer Program

ASCO now offers more opportunities for members to volunteer internationally. These can be as simple as signing the UICC World Cancer Declaration, or as in-depth as lecturing at an international educational conference or workshop. Recently, another opportunity has been added to the list: ASCO’s International Cancer Corps (ICC).

With increasing cancer rates in developing countries and a low number of trained oncology professionals in these areas, channels for exchanging knowledge in cancer care are critically needed. In response, ASCO has partnered with Health Volunteers Overseas (HVO), an international medical education organization, to give ASCO’s member oncologists an opportunity to support cancer care medical centers in developing countries, share their medical expertise, and build long-term, supportive relationships with the doctors who provide cancer care in these countries.

ICC volunteers are paired with a medical center where the training needs of the facility match the expertise of the volunteer. Volunteers spend one to four weeks onsite, where they will teach and train staff, residents, and students, and gain insight into the center’s cancer management needs and challenges. While ICC volunteers will not treat patients directly, their value will be in sharing their clinical knowledge and skills with their international colleagues. Upon their return to the United States, ASCO’s volunteers will continue to share the Society’s professional resources with the medical center to help sustain and improve cancer care in the region.

ASCO’s first ICC site was stationed in Honduras—an area where more than 50% of the 7.3 million residents live below the poverty line, 20% have no access to health care, and there are fewer than 20 trained oncologists. “The need for training in hematology/oncology is critical,” said Ligia Fu, MD, the onsite contact for the

ICC program in Honduras.

“Through the International Cancer Corps, ASCO members will be able to contribute their professional skills in an important and meaningful way to help people with cancer around the world,” said ASCO President Douglas W. Blayney, MD, in launching the new ASCO program. “In addition, the long-term relationships that ASCO and ASCO volunteers develop with their overseas counterparts will foster mutual learning and growth for years to come.”

ASCO and HVO plan to expand the program each year to an additional developing country, while remaining firmly committed to multi-year volunteer and educational support of already-established sites. These and other opportunities are detailed on the ASCO website at www.asco.org/volunteer, where a volunteer interest form can be downloaded.

Interested in Volunteering with ICC?

ASCO members who are interested in being considered for the ICC program should contact Kara Garten at kara.garten@asco.org or visit the volunteer website (www.asco.org/volunteer) for further information.