



A Conversation with Sarah Cohen about her Experience as a part of Clínica de Familia's Student Program



"When I applied to the student program at Clínica de Familia La Romana in the Dominican Republic, I really wanted to work directly with patients living with HIV, to be part of the implementation of meaningful interventions, and to observe direct patient care. I had hoped to understand how high-quality health care was delivered to a vulnerable population with limited resources. Coming into this experience, I don't think I realized how many opportunities for connection there would be between myself and the patients.

From going into places of sex work with Rosa and seeing her connection with all of the women there, to being able to be part of the health education efforts both in the clinic and in the local schools, to joining community health workers on visits to patients' homes, I got to know both the patient experience and the local health care provider experience.

The staff was so dedicated and thoughtful and committed to their patients. For example, on each home visit, the health promoters knew their patients' life stories; they knew what their needs were and how they could help meet them. I was particularly impressed by the educational interventions and health literacy efforts that were being given in patients' homes and also in the clinic's waiting rooms. On home visits, I saw what it looks like for a health care organization to make a concerted effort to bring care to the people who need it most in a way that is accessible and understandable. For students rotating from abroad, it is really valuable to understand how economic and social factors shape a patient's life when you're tangibly there, talking to them, seeing where they live, asking them questions, making that connection. It really makes clear the impact of social determinants of health that affect people's daily lives and access to resources, and highlights how good health care needs to be sensitive to addressing all those factors. I couldn't have predicted how meaningful all those connections would turn out to be.

Aside from the visits to people's homes and hearing their appointments with doctors, it was really powerful to do the interviews for my book project, ["Historias de Vida: Testimonios de Personas que viven con VIH en República Dominicana"], because I had the opportunity to sit one-on-one with patients from all different backgrounds and to ask them about their experiences. Hearing from them in their own words about what they've gone through, how they see their own story, and how they see their experiences with health care gave me a well-rounded picture of each patient's experience of health rather than just their health condition.

I hope that global health is part of my whole career. Clínica de Familia showed me what global health should look like when it's done thoughtfully, sustainably, and grounded in the needs of the local population. That's what I hope for in my career...to be part of a system that puts its patients first and is constantly innovating how to better serve its population.

I can't recommend the experience at Clínica de Familia enough. I think that it's really impactful and worthwhile for any student interested in working with underserved populations. Clínica de Familia La Romana fosters a really open, supportive environment where students can ask questions, be engaged in many different experiences, and work with fantastic mentors. The experience is worthwhile for seeing how health care is conducted in a different health system; improving Spanish, which is really important for working pretty much anywhere in the United States or abroad; and developing the cultural sensitivity that is central to being a doctor. Clínica de Familia helps students be as prepared as possible to interact with patients in a meaningful way and is a really great place to learn."

