

The Honduras Healing Recovery Project: Second Yearly Report

By Maria Dolores Diaz

In October 2000, a four-person brigade of experienced and bilingual acupuncturists returned to Honduras for two weeks to continue the work they had begun in April 1999, treating survivors of Hurricane Mitch in makeshift clinics near the shelters outside of Tegucigalpa.

Two of the team members - myself and Leticia Reyes -- were born in Honduras. The other team members, Rusty Klobas and Pamela Brady, were from Maine and Vermont, respectively.

Rusty and I were part of the original brigade of acupuncturists, psychologists and social workers that had first gone to Honduras in 1999 to help with the healing process following the hurricane's devastation. While the 2000 team was smaller due to limited funds, they still managed to treat over 300 patients while dispensing medical and herbal supplies and continuing to train public health personnel in auricular acupuncture.

It has been nearly three years since Hurricane Mitch struck, killing over 5,000 Hondurans, destroying 70% of the country's cities, and leaving over two million people homeless. Thousands of people are still living in shelters, often without running water and with little or no access to medical care. These are people whose homes, barrios, towns, and entire hillsides were washed away by the hurricane's floods.

This year's PRODARAS team (Proyecto de Acupuncture Para La Rehabilitacion de Honduras, or Honduras Healing Recovery Project) worked together in single communal rooms, training doctors, nurses and other health care providers in basic auricular acupuncture technique and theory in the morning, then treating patients in the afternoon. The nurse trainees set up a triage system based on the age and condition of the patients, many of whom began waiting in line at 5:00 am for a chance to be treated. On one occasion, at one shelter, they had to work on the floor using mattresses as treatment tables. At another shelter, the stage of a school auditorium served as the clinic, while the patients sat on benches and chairs on the floor, observing

and waiting for treatment. This particular format of treatment actually helped the team feel more supported, while enhancing the atmosphere of the entire room. As the acupuncturists began their work, they soon noticed how the patients would quickly become very quiet, establishing an amazingly peaceful setting.

In 1999, the acupuncture brigade dealt primarily with post-traumatic stress. In contrast, the 2000 team encountered more patients with chronic conditions, such as arthritis; respiratory ailments (asthma, bronchitis and allergies); and gastrointestinal conditions (gastritis, colitis and parasites) resulting from continued unsanitary living conditions. People came from far away to receive treatment; for example, a man who suffered from congestive heart failure, and a six-year old girl who had previously been diagnosed with a brain tumor. In cases such as these, medical doctors worked more as a complementary and integrative team. In one instance, they diagnosed a case of *chagas* (American trypanosomiasis), quickly establishing a treatment plan while prescribing the needed Western medical prescription. The doctors and nurses were able to put into practice immediately the auricular acupuncture they had learned during their training sessions. Some doctors invited patients to return for followup care; others offered to go around to visit patients' communities.

Because it is both effective and low in cost and technological support, auricular acupuncture is particularly appropriate in many resource-poor communities and public health settings. The PRODARAS team and their Honduran colleagues stretched the limited resources to meet the needs of as many people as possible. Everyone coming in for treatment received a toothbrush and appropriate herbs and vitamins, along with basic acupuncture treatment and advice on how to maintain general health, as well as dealing with specific conditions. Patients responded with *ojos de gratitud* - eyes and faces filled with gratitude.

Mornings were taken up with the training of Honduran health care providers in Chinese medicine, focusing primarily on auricular acupuncture; *qi gong* exercises; acupressure; and basic methods of achieving bodily equilibrium through simple but effective techniques. For many of the doctors and nurses, the training opened up new worlds of possibilities, as they affirmed in their written evaluation comments:

"Acupuncture is effective and easy to use."

"Acupuncture makes Western medicine more effective and valuable."

"Oriental medicine is an art and science that deserves all of my respect."

"We learned to be patient, to practice acupuncture on ourselves. I now feel closer to my patients."

"I learned how to control my asthma."

"The group set a very good example of how to treat patients *con respeto y cario* (with respect and affection)."

The training left the dedicated Honduran health care providers (who were volunteering their time as true public health professionals) wanting to expand the impact of the project. One doctor, the head of a trauma center for the survivors of political torture, is now working to incorporate Chinese medicine into the university's curriculum as a teaching profession. The Honduras Healing Recovery Project will support this educational effort by sending books, materials and teachers, pending availability of funds.

The PRODARAS team has been asked by the health care providers to return to Honduras, and continues to have support from the Ministry of Health. A number of doctors and nurses were eager to use acupuncture to treat the country's widespread drug addiction problems, while others have expressed a desire to use acupuncture for conditions in which allopathic medicine may not be as helpful. Many thanked the team for sharing their knowledge and service. In the words of one health care provider, "PRODARAS is a program of great assistance to our people who are suffering and who do not have resources or access to health services." Another said, "*Dios se los pague* (God will repay you). You have come where no one else would come."

I can sum up the feelings of the team with a simple phrase: *Se siente uno tan satisfecho* ("One feels so satisfied"). At this time, I have asked one of the original brigade members, Dr. Selena Sermeo, to do a needs assessment in her own native country of El Salvador, which has recently been devastated by an earthquake. Both Dr. Sermeo and I have expressed our moral commitments to help in the healing process in our communities, which have been so devastated by natural disasters. HHRP has been both exciting and a rewarding experience in quickly bringing relief to people who have been so traumatized. The dream to establish "acupuncturists without borders" may actually become a reality!

HHRP gratefully acknowledges the following schools, herbal supply companies and acupuncture suppliers who have donated their time and materials to our project:

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We would also like to acknowledge the many individuals who have been the "guardian angels" of this project, and who have made it possible to accomplish our goals.

Editor's note: Those interested in contributing to HHRP may send their tax-deductible contributions to:

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