In the African country of Liberia, malaria, yellow fever, typhoid and worms replace Western concerns of heart attacks, high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Only 51 percent of all births are attended by skilled health care providers.

The lone blood pressure cuff in a hospital might be unreliable. The supposedly sterile surgical suite might have a crowing chicken—the surgical technician’s supper for that night—inside a cupboard.

As part of their clinical rotations, five Duquesne University physician assistant students and a faculty adviser recently spent two weeks working in Liberia. These fifth-year graduate students served in the maternity ward of ELWA Hospital in the Liberian capital of Monrovia, providing pre- and post-natal care, as well as emergency care, surgical services and inpatient services for adults and children.

In addition, they volunteered in an ambulatory clinic in the jungle, a walk-in clinic in the bush and treated minor illnesses at orphanages. Generally, they provided care, supplies and compassion.

A New View on Accessibility
“We went from Pittsburgh, one of the best places in the world for health care, to one of the poorest countries,” says Mark Freeman, the trip’s faculty mentor and assistant professor in Duquesne’s physician assistant program. “We saw illnesses we had just read about—malaria, typhoid and other diseases that we think are under control. It has given us a lesson in resourcefulness, hope and faith, and provided life-changing experiences that give us a new perspective on our own health care in the U.S.”

Despite debate about American health care reform, student Kayla Breindel observes, “We’re so lucky for the health care we have; we have the opportunity to get health care.” That is far from the case in Liberia, students discovered.

“There is such a lack of supplies, room, organization and staff motivation—which is no wonder, seeing the conditions they are dealing with,” says student Laura Berkebile.

“The hospital probably has about 100 beds and three doctors.”

An inpatient stay can cost as much as $5 to $10 U.S.—the equivalent of a year’s salary for many Liberians.

As a result, Freeman explains, “They wait to seek health care until the...
Breindel and classmate Olivia Hess tell of a 20-year-old man whose brother brought him to the hospital. The hospital’s single X-ray machine was down, there was no ultrasound equipment, the pulse oximeter didn’t work and the blood pressure cuff was unreliable, but their best guess was the young man had a small bowel obstruction compounded by malaria.

“Both would have been easily treated in the U.S.,” says Hess.

In Liberia, his situation was grim. “He was looking up at Kayla and me, and we held his hand the entire day,” says Hess. The doctors, who had dismissed his case as futile as soon as they saw him, were all gone when he gasped his last breath. Hess administered CPR, to no avail.

“To Liberian people, death is a common occurrence,” says Freeman.

Compassion is in short supply in a land desensitized to death as a result of civil wars and deadly medical conditions.

In a remote village, after a long dirt road ride from Monrovia, the Duquesne group encountered hundreds—including many children—who sought medical treatment.

“A lot of the kids there have worms—hookworms, tapeworms, other worms—and we had prepackaged medicine for 70 of them,” remembers student Michael Lynn. “It was tough. You have to draw a line. It gives you an awareness of the lack of resources and supplies there.”

Altogether, the students treated nearly 250 villagers in the bush, many of whom walked for hours to be evaluated.

Lessons in Resiliency and Faith

“The entire experience in Liberia was life-changing, spiritually, emotionally and clinically,” says student Amanda Candelmo, who delivered a baby boy by herself.

“The women in Liberia experience all childbirth naturally and are not given the option of medication for pain relief,” she says. “These women continuously pray to God for strength and guidance during delivery and do not complain of the pain they are bearing. This was such a powerful testament to faith for me, and it was so beautiful to experience.”

Amid sometimes bleak conditions, the team found amazing happiness and resiliency.

“Faith is a huge part of their lives,” says Hess. “Faith in God gives them something instead of nothing.”

“The reality of spiritual and emotional health being just as important as physical health will always be a forefront thought as I treat my patients,” says Candelmo. “I have woken up each day and taken the time to pray and thank God for the blessings I have since returning from Liberia. It has made my life much more simple in day-to-day living after experiencing and witnessing what it is like to live with nothing.”

The students were deeply touched by the time they spent with orphans. In Liberia, international adoptions have been halted except for children with disabilities. And Liberia’s children bear the burden of the impact of two recent civil wars in a country that is among the most impoverished in the world.

“Where we have a Starbucks on every corner; they have an orphanage on every corner,” says Freeman.

At one orphanage, the students played with a group of children, using one basketball—no hoop—and a rubber tire. “It was unbelievably rewarding, the smiles we brought to the kids in the orphanage,” says Hess.

While in Liberia, the Duquesne students distributed more than 300 pounds of supplies collected by the group and by Brother’s Foundation, a Pittsburgh-based organization that promotes international health and education by sending donated medical, pharmaceutical, agricultural and other supplies abroad. Robert Peirce, Jr., a 1962 Duquesne Law School graduate who has visited Liberia, brought the foundation’s efforts to the attention of Duquesne and provided financial support for the DU contingent.

On their last day in Liberia, the Duquesne group distributed gowns, gloves and sutures, medications, children’s clothes and toys, even their own blood pressure cuffs, stethoscopes and the scrubs off their backs.

In return, the group received grateful thanks, songs and smiles, and the lasting feeling that their presence made a difference.

“We knew we wouldn’t go there and be able to help everyone,” says Hess, “but we brought smiles to the faces of the people we could help.”

Liberian children ecstatically enjoy lollipop treats shared by Duquesne visitors.