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Newsletter November 2023

This issue of the AVA Newsletter is dedicated to the second Aid Via Action Short Mission Trip (AVA SMT), which took place November 6-10, at Hospital Nacional de San Benito (HNSB) in El Petén, Guatemala.



The second AVA SMT was completed successfully during the week of November 6-10. In total, we performed 23 operations in two days. Our week in El Petén, was similar to our [first AVA SMT](#) in January of this year. This year, we had orientation on Monday, which introduced all participants to the

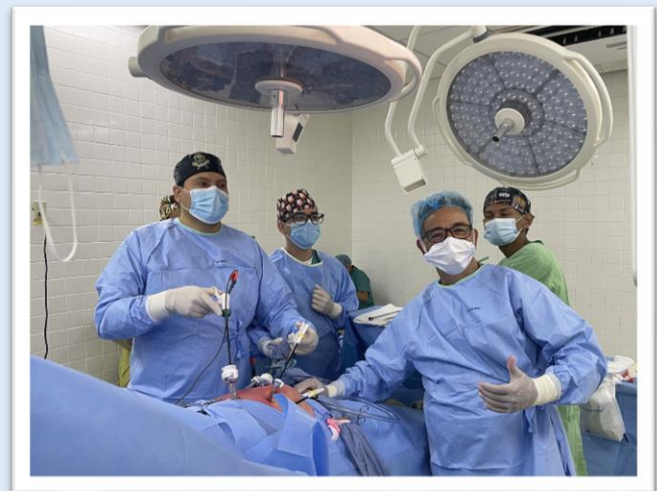


activities that would occur during the week.



Participants:

We were very fortunate to have a strong group yet again during this AVA SMT. Bing Yi (Medical Student – UT San Antonio, and an AVA board member) came along with his significant other Zoe Wu. Just before coming to this trip, Zoe found out that she had been accepted into nursing school in San Antonio, Texas. They were pivotal in organizing patient activities during the two days of



operations. We had three residents that joined us for this trip. Michael Hu, MD was an undergraduate student at UCLA when Jenny and I undertook a

fellowship in Nutritional Oncology at the UCLA Center for Human Nutrition. He then went into medical school and two residency programs. He is in his last year of fellowship in plastic surgery in Pennsylvania. He has always stayed in touch with Jenny and I and has been a strong supporter of AVA. Last September, we organized an [AVA 5K](#) to raise funds for the organization for this mission trip. Dr. Hu changed his travel plans at the last minute to go so Singapore such that he could personally do the



race in support of AVA. I am glad he was able to join us during this trip. He was with me and Dr. Juan Antonio Mendoza during the first day of the AVA SMT. As a plastic surgeon, he performed beautiful closures of the four operations that we did that day.

The other two residents that came were Drs. Juan Favela and Madison Argo. Juan and



Madison were medical students at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, and I have been fortunate to mentor them since. They couple's matched into a general surgery residency program at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. They are in their third year of clinical training after two years of clinical work and two years of research. The

weekend before the AVA SMT Madison called me to tell me that she had been playing volleyball a couple



of days prior and had unfortunately ruptured her Achilles tendon. She was going to undergo surgical intervention the Tuesday just prior to departure to the AVA SMT. She was devastated to learn that she might not be able to make it. However, she asked



her orthopedic surgeon and received a green light to make the trip. She bought a wheelchair and had crutches to make the trip. She knew that she would only be able to observe but she was excited to make it to the trip. Juan and Madison were with Dr. Anny Ochoa the first day and then with me and Dr. Eugenia Quiñones the second day.

I was fortunate that Brian Walker, CRNA came with us for the SMT. Currently, HNSB has had a shortage

of anesthesiologists this year and Brian coming on the trip was extremely important for its success. As Dr. Ortiz put it during one of our conversations, he became the director of HNSB in 2020. In 2021 it was the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic; in 2022, they had a shortage of general surgeons; and in 2023 they had a shortage of Anesthesiologist. Thus, Brian coming on this trip was pivotal. Additionally, his experience with other mission trips to Perú gave him experience to navigate the operating rooms at HNSB. He was with me both days and on a couple of occasions we had to convert from local to general anesthesia. Brian made these transitions like a walk in the park.

Dr. Herazo is now a veteran of our AVA SMTs. He has a great deal of experience at HNSB, and everyone was happy to learn that he was coming back. I am particularly grateful because he agreed to come on this trip at very short notice. He was in the laparoscopic room both days. This was the busiest room as they performed four laparoscopic cholecystectomies each day.

The final anesthesiologist that joined us for this AVA SMT was Dr. Oscar Emilio Fuentes. The first time I came to HNSB was with an organization called Refuge International. At that time, I met Deborah Bell who was in charge of the organization then. Unfortunately, we stayed disconnected for some time. As I learned there was a shortage of anesthesiologists at HNSB for this AVA SMT, I panicked! I then started calling everyone that I possibly knew to determine if an anesthesiologist could join us on very short notice. Patty Stevens got involved and I was very pleased to learn that she connected with Deb Bell who then recommended Dr. Fuentes. Dr. Fuentes drove 300 km to come and join us for this AVA SMT. He is a wonderful and talented anesthesiologist. I was very pleased with his participation. He was with Dr. Anny Ochoa for her cases, and I can only describe these two as the dynamic DUO. They were amazing. During the second day, Drs. Ochoa and Fuentes completed four open cholecystectomies from 7 am to 11:50 am. That was simply impressive!

In September 2022, I went to Cozumel to participate in an Ironman 70.3 (Swim 1.2 miles, bike

56 miles, and run 13.1 miles). As I was waiting to enter the appropriate wave for my swimming group, I noticed an athlete in front of me with the same age as me (both of us very young). I started talking to him in Spanish and he was nodding to me but had a confused face with some of my words and comments. I then talked to him in English, and he replied also in English at which time I asked him where he was from. "Brazil" he said. He then talked some more, and the conversation led me to ask him what he did for living in Brazil. "I am a doctor" he said. I then asked what kind, to which he replied, "I am a general surgeon". What are the odds? We then stayed in touch regularly via email. He then came to Texas to do the Waco Ironman 70.3 October 15, 2023. Dr. Luiz Rocha then joined us for this AVA SMT. It turned out that Luis and Luiz made an amazing team along with Dr. Corzo.

Dr. Anny Ochoa is a member of the board of directors of AVA and a local surgeon. She has been exceedingly critical of the AVA SMTs. Her experience with the hospital, the patient population and surgical abilities always impresses everyone that sees her at work. The other three local surgeons participating in this AVA SMT were: Drs. Eugenia Quiñones, Juan Antonio Mendoza, and Francisco Corzo. We truly had a fantastic team just like we did during the first trip.

The Cases:

One of the main missions of AVA is to increase the laparoscopic cases at HNSB. I was very pleased that eight laparoscopic cholecystectomies were performed during our two days at the site. Drs. Corzo and Rocha were an excellent laparoscopic team. All the laparoscopic cholecystectomies occurred without any incidents whatsoever.

The first day, Anny had two open cholecystectomies, an open inguinal hernia, and a lipoma on the shoulder. She completed all these cases before the other rooms. The second day, Drs Ochoa and Funtes were amazing as they completed four open cholecystectomies under regional anesthesia in less than five hours.



The first day in my room, I had two inguinal hernias. Additionally, there was a hernia that was thought to be a recurrent incisional hernia from a previous open appendectomy in a young woman. However, during the examination, the hernia did not seem to be at the site of the incision. Dr. Mendoza and I decided to explore her with an incision above the prior appendectomy scar. It was difficult to find. This gave me the first clue that we were dealing with a Spigelian hernia. Sure enough, following dissection of a group of muscles we found the hernia sac. This was a large hernia sac. We reduced it and fixed the hernia defect with proline mesh. My last case of the first day had been booked as an inguinal hernia in a 70-year-old woman. During the initial examination of the hernia, there was an immediate suspicion of a femoral hernia. Immediately after getting to Scarpa's fascia, we opened the aponeurosis of the external oblique and found a chronically incarcerated hernia below the inguinal ligament (a femoral hernia). We reduced this hernia and proceeded with a McVay repair. We also placed a small piece of mesh over this repair. The second day, I had a very large inguinoscrotal hernia that was repaired with mesh. The last case had been booked as an umbilical hernia. However, during my

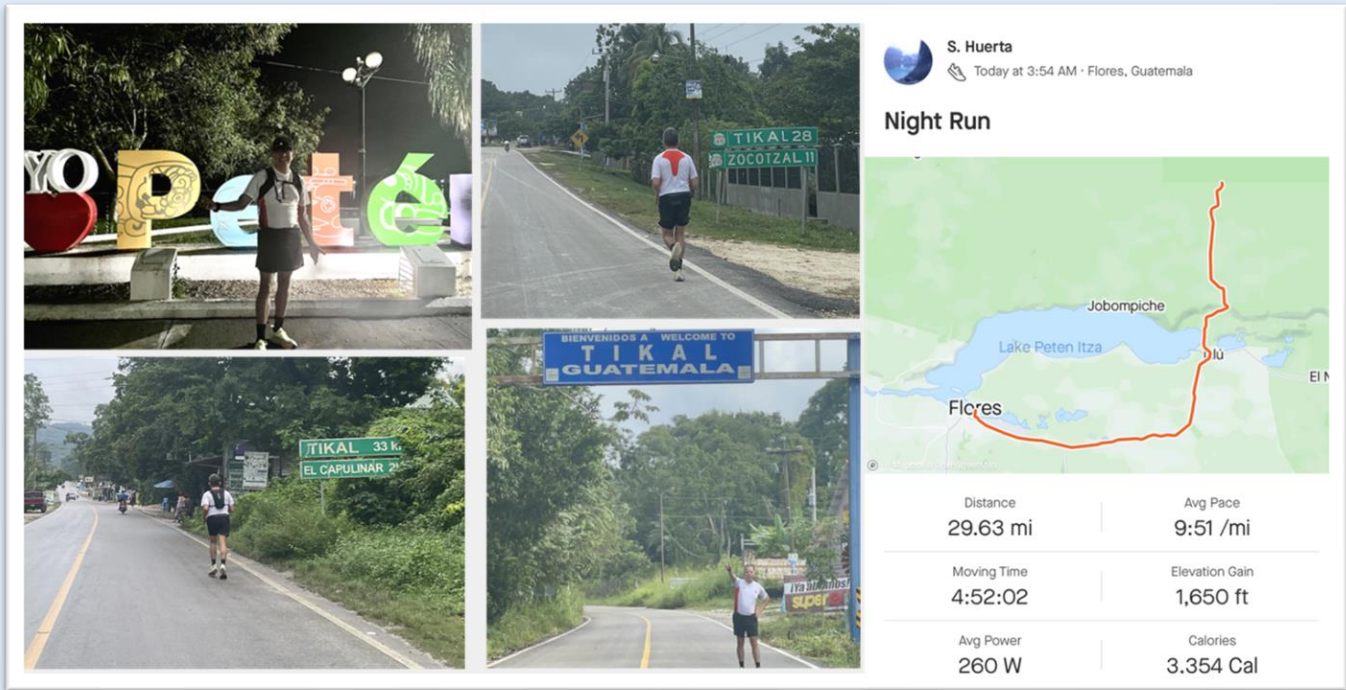
initial examination, it was clear that this was a primary epigastric hernia. During exploration, there was also a small umbilical hernia. The fascia was weak around and we connected both defects. This led to a defect ~5 cm. We fixed this defect with dual-sided mesh (underlay) with o-Ethibond in an interrupted fashion.

During the two days, twenty-three cases were completed without any complications.

A Day of Fun:

Traditionally, we take Wednesday for the group to go to Tikal. I believe that anyone who comes to Flores for any reason must make a trip to Tikal. I heard from the group that the tour guide they had this time for the group was phenomenal. Dr. Herazo, who was there just this past January, found it fascinating again. He told me that he visited different places that he had not seen before at the site.

As for me, I decided to take the day off to run the distance from Flores to Tikal. I had done this distance before, and I knew that from Flores to Tikal would be slightly over 29 miles. Anny's husband arranged a car who would follow me all the way there. Luis was wonderful. I was anxious the night before, woke up at 2 am, and could not go back to sleep. I took a shower and waited for Luis who was waiting for me in front of the hotel at 3:45 am. He drove me to the island at the sign "I love El Petén", which is at the entrance of the island of Flores. I started the run just before 4 am. Luis was driving just behind me ~10 mph. The streets were empty. I felt very safe because he had the emergency light behind and occasional cars passing by had no trouble seeing me. At around 5 am, I was at mile 6. It started drizzling. The temperature was very nice, the skies were dark, the entire street was mine, I had a sense of tranquility to be running in this place that was indescribable. There was a sense of serenity and happiness that constantly reminded me why I ran. This run to Tikal was simply amazing. I made it to Tikal before the group just under 5 hours. I had intended to go into the park but decided to have coffee at a restaurant next to the entrance and after sitting for about half an hour, my legs decided not to



go anywhere. I then went back to the hotel with my driver with whom I had a nice conversation on the way back to the hotel.

A New Project for AVA: Universidad de Ciencias de La Salud Mariano Galvez.

I first met Dr. Jose Antonio Flores during my first mission trip to HNSB with Refuge International, at which time he was the director of HNSB. He has always had a strong commitment to education, and we stayed regularly in touch regarding various projects with educational activities. Additionally,

his role as director of student education of the Universidad de Ciencias de La Salud Mariano Galvez in El Petén. He was interested in developing a simulation center for medical students to prepare them for their clinical rotations. Coincidentally, at the same time, two students from UT Southwestern had contacted me to mentor them regarding projects with global health. Enzo Mesarick and Jennie Hocking met with me at the VA, and I thought that this was a wonderful opportunity for them to do something from students to students. Enzo and Jennie were amazing. They contacted the SIMS center at UTSW and obtained sufficient supplies for the project. The objectives were: basic principles of (1) Nasogastric tube placement, (2) Indwelling catheter insertion, (3) basic principles of CPR, (4) basic principles of knot tying and suturing, (5) basic principles of Jackson-Pratt



Dr. Flores is an athlete and avid biker. We talked about our common interests regarding sports as well. However, about a year ago he contacted me in



and other surgical drains management, and (6) basic principles of pneumothorax needle placement. Enzo and Jennie obtained all the supplies and developed a Power Point Guide for these activities. Jennie made a trip to deliver them. Notably, she



spent a whole day traveling on Thursday, made it to her Airbnb at 11:30 pm on Thursday and was ready to meet me in my hotel for delivery at 7:30 am. We had breakfast at Hotel Casona del Lago with Juan and Madison. Dr. Flores then came to pick us up to go to the school for the delivery at 9 am.

It was at this time that we were fortunate to meet Dr. Rafael Espada. Dr. Espada is a remarkable surgeon who had a prominent career as a cardiothoracic surgeon at Baylor in Houston for three decades. He occupied the position of Michael DeBakey at Baylor. As a native Guatemalan, he never forgot his roots and continued to deliver care for patients in Guatemala. He was the Vice President of Guatemala from 2008 to 2012. He is currently the Dean of the Universidad de Ciencias de La Salud Mariano Galvez. He made a trip from Guatemala City to Flores for the delivery of the materials for the SIMS lab and to give a few words of wisdom to the students at he the branch in El Peten and to be present for a talk that I delivered to the medical students entitled seven lessons from

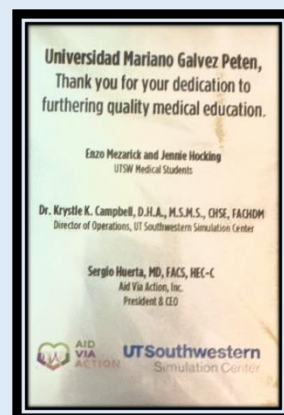


running seven marathons in seven days: lessons from a personal trajectory from crossing seven finished lines.



It was immediately obvious that I was standing next to a monumental figure in surgery and surgical education. It was amazing to have been able to share the stage with him and listen to his amazing worlds of wisdom. “It is a privilege to be a student of medicine, but this privilege comes with responsibilities” he noted. “You should always

attempt to associate yourselves with someone better than you. That will make you better. If you hang around with alcoholics and thieves, you will probably become one. Better people will want you to be better” he added. We then headed to the HNSB to meet with Dr. Ortiz to discuss medical student education. This was a wonderful day. We will continue supporting the activities of the University and I will continue to determine how I can be of help to the University along with the students.





A New Site for Hosting our Team.

This year, I broke tradition and stayed at a different hotel. I always stayed at Maya International. However, this time I contacted a different hotel and found them to be very courteous and available to help us with all our needs. Hotel La Casona del Lago was magnificent coordinating all the logistics that we needed to address. They had a room for us for orientation with a projector and provided dinner for orientation on Monday. We also had the award ceremony at the same site with dinner as well. This

was great. I met with the manager Liliam Vazquez and immediately recognized that she will be an excellent contact for our future AVA SMTs. Expect to continue to find Hotel La Casona del Lago as our official hosting site for upcoming trips.

It was a great accomplishment overall. Now, onto planning the next SMT in January 2024.

I will see you all there!

THANK YOU ALL!

S. Huerta

Sergio Huerta, M.D., F.A.C.S., HEC-C
 Aid Via Action Inc.
 President & CEO

