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An Exploration of the Role of Short Term Medical Missions in Health Care Provision in Honduras

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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2005
Abstract

Short term medical missions, or medical brigades are teams of expatriate health professionals and lay people, who travel to Latin America and other parts of the world for a week or two to provide health care to the poor. While the number and popularity of these teams appears to be increasing, to date there has been little literature or critical research addressing their role.

This thesis addresses the role of Short Term Medical Missions (STMMs), who they are, what they do and how they fit into health service provision in developing nations. In particular it outlines the services provided by STMMs, including clinical services, resource provision and preventative services, it discusses the motivation for using STMMs as service providers and it also begins to explore the impact they have on the populations and on local health care services in the areas they operate. This is done within the context of Honduras, a nation that has seen an influx of these teams in recent years, particularly since Hurricane Mitch in 1998. Honduras faces many challenges in health and health care and STMMs have been seen by some as a means of “filling gaps”. This study questions whether STMMs are indeed actually filling real gaps, and if they are, whether they most appropriate means of doing so, as there are many limitations to the ability of short term, outside volunteers to provide quality services.

While not directly measuring the impact of STMMs on the health status of the population, this study discusses the actual and potential impact of STMMs on local health services, and argues that there are potential long-term consequences to their use. These consequences include an increasing dependency on outside assistance that may be detrimental to the long-term development of National health services.
Acknowledgements

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I am very grateful to my supervisors Dr. Barbara Nowak and Dr. Manuhuia Barcham for their input and encouragement, and for their enthusiasm for and interest in a topic in which many people here in New Zealand had no knowledge of.

Finally I would like to dedicate this study to the two people who really made it happen. My dear husband whose translation and tour guide skills, cultural knowledge and contacts were invaluable, and whose love and endless patience were essential throughout the research process; and to our beautiful daughter Maya. Her presence during fieldwork (as a growing ‘bump’) opened up relationships and paved the way for many conversations, and her impending birth gave great motivation for the data analysis and writing up of this study. Thank you so much, I love you both.
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**Abbreviations**

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BNA</td>
<td>Basic Needs Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BP</td>
<td>Before Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CESAMO</td>
<td>Health Centres with a Physician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CESAR</td>
<td>Rural Health Centres (without a Physician)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEDRETE</td>
<td>Medical Readiness Training Exercise – short-term health clinic conducted by the United States military.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAHO</td>
<td>Pan American Health Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHC</td>
<td>Primary Health Care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRA</td>
<td>Participatory Rural Appraisal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAP</td>
<td>Structural Adjustment Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STMM</td>
<td>Short Term Medical Mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNAH</td>
<td>Autonomous National University of Honduras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children's Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US/ USA</td>
<td>United States of America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USAID</td>
<td>United States Agency for International Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
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