



General Surgery Program  
Oncological Surgery Mission Trip  
Instituto Oncológico del Oriente Boliviano

Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Santa Cruz, Bolivia  
12-19 March 2023

**I. Introduction**

The Oncological Institute of Eastern Bolivia is the most important public hospital in the country focused on cancer. Solidarity Bridge has partnered with the Oncological Institute since 2018, when the Institute hosted our first Oncological Surgery Mission Trip focused on surgical treatment of colorectal, gallbladder, liver, gastric, and other cancers. An expanded team returned in 2019. A third Oncological Surgery Mission Trip planned for March 2020 was cancelled due to the COVID 19 pandemic.

**II. Goals**

The goals of this Mission Trip are to assist in the expansion of the Institute's capacity to treat its patients by:

- a. providing specialized training and mentoring of the Institute's professionals in the diagnosis, treatment, and care of cancer patients, especially in relation to surgically treatable conditions;
- b. provide opportunities for U.S. medical professionals and mission leadership to expand their knowledge by working alongside our Bolivian partners,
- c. identify and help fill essential surgical equipment and supply needs,
- d. assist in the surgical treatment of patients with particularly complex pathologies, and
- e. accompany and spiritually support Bolivian patients and their families and the US and Bolivian medical teams as they manage difficult medical challenges.

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**III. Summary of Activities**

**a/b. Training and mentorship, and knowledge exchange**

The training and knowledge-exchange methodology used on this mission trip was based on working as an integrated team throughout the patient care process. This began on the first day at the Oncological Institute, when the local and visiting professionals reviewed each of the patient cases proposed by the host physicians. Chief resident Dr. Cecilia Padilla presented the patient histories, including images and labs. The U.S. professionals and the more experienced Bolivian surgeons who would operate alongside the U.S. team discussed each case and developed tentative treatment plans. Several Bolivian surgical residents and medical students also attended the case discussions.

This methodology of working in partnership also occurred between the mission anesthesiologist and his local peers throughout the week. Physician Assistants Allison Soward and Stephanie Morup also assisted with the full spectrum of patient care while exchanging knowledge about specialized surgical supplies, patient care protocols, and other topics with the dozens of Bolivian doctors, nurses, techs, and students who assisted and shadowed the mission.

**c. Equipping and supplying**

The mission team carried key equipment and supplies needed to carry out the anticipated procedures and to leave for the Institute to continue to offer such surgeries. Additional supplies were shipped from the Cochabamba warehouse of Puente de Solidaridad for use during the mission week and as a donation for the Institute's ongoing work. We are especially grateful to MAP International and Americares for key equipment and supply donations used during the mission surgeries and donated to the Oncological Institute.

**d. Treating patients with complex needs**

The surgical cases selected by the Institute included especially challenging suspected or confirmed gastric, liver, duodenal, gallbladder, and pancreatic cancers. For the most difficult cases, mission surgeon Dr. Bilimoria worked with the young but highly-skilled partner, Dr. Susan Aviles, helping further hone her capacities to manage such complex cases.

**e. Accompaniment**

Missioner Ted Johnson worked alongside Puente de Solidaridad team members Marcela Canedo and Carmen Salses to accompany and provide spiritual support for patients and their families as they navigated the care and treatment process. Mr. Johnson and Ms. Canedo also led team rituals and reflections throughout the week to facilitate spaces to enter into and better understand the Bolivian reality, and to process the emotionally and physically demanding work undertaken by the team.



Dr. Malcolm Bilimoria and PA Allison Soward (in blue) and Dr. Susan Aviles (in yellow) with a patient's mother and sister.

#### **IV. Impact Story**

Mission trips provide unique opportunities for Solidarity Bridge and Puente de Solidaridad to identify exceptionally-skilled local physicians, and to develop mutually-supportive relationships that will encourage them to become long-term partners of our permanent surgical programs. This visit at the Oncological Institute provided such an opportunity. Mission surgeon Dr. Bilimoria verified the remarkable skill set of local surgeon Dr. Susan Aviles, while also noting the specific equipment, supply and other supports she and her team need to continue to carry out their work to serve the country's low-income patients.

## V. **Future Outlook**

The Puente de Solidaridad social worker, Carmen Salses, will monitor the recovery and follow-up care of the patients served and serve as liaison with the mission team to keep them informed. Upon conclusion of the mission week, the US and Bolivian participants agreed to continue to connect via virtual platforms and communications. Solidarity Bridge and Puente de Solidaridad staff also took note of equipment and supplies needed by the Institute to continue to perform the procedures honed during our visit. Access to these supplies is also critical so that the Institute can retain skilled specialists to serve its patient who cannot afford care elsewhere. A fourth mission trip to the Oncological Institute may be convoked in the first quarter of 2024.

## VI. **Mission Team, Hosts, Staff, Santa Cruz authorities, and volunteers**

This mission week was preceded by months of preparations and made possible thanks to the contributions of dozens of participants and supporters, including the following:

### **U.S. missionaries:**

Malcolm Bilimoria, MD, Oncological Surgeon, Northwest Community Hospital, Illinois  
Nabeel Khan, MD, Anesthesiologist. WellStar Kennestone hospital, Georgia.  
Stephanie Morup, Physician Assistant, Billings Clinic, Montana.  
Allison Soward, Physician Assistant, Northwest Community Hospital, Illinois  
Ted Johnson, Team Accompaniment

### **Solidarity Bridge staff:**

Jodi Grahl, Director of General Surgery Program, Solidarity Bridge

### **Puente de Solidaridad staff:**

Patricia Vargas, Executive Director  
Marcela Canedo, Accompaniment  
Carmen Salses, Social Worker  
Desireé Méndez, Supplies Coordinator  
Ariel Montaña, Communications and Logistics

### **Bolivian volunteer interpreters:**

Dr. Pamela Copaga  
Dr. Nicolás Rojas  
Erick Urquieta

### **Oncological Institute team:**

Dr. Gloria Rodriguez, Medical Director  
Dr. Cecilia Padilla, Responsible for patient selection and preparation  
Dr. Pablo Sitic, Chief of Surgery  
General Surgeons: Dr. Susan Aviles, Dr. Nelson Béjar, Dr. Marco Antonio Sadud, Dr. Alejandro Gutierrez, Dr. José Luis Quispe, Dr. Mena, Dr. Jimenez.  
Anesthesiologists: Dr. Karoline Rocabado, Dr. Montoya, Dr. Mostajo, Dr. Bolaños.  
And all the other nurses, doctors, staff, and volunteers present throughout the mission week.

Thank you also to the distinguished authorities of the Department of Santa Cruz, in particular the Minister of Health and his staff and office, for their indispensable support.