



Gynecologic Surgery Mission Trip Instituto Chuquisaqueño de Oncología (ICO)

Sucre, Chuquisaca, Bolivia
14-22 October 2023

I. Introduction

This mission trip aimed to build upon training developed on our two previous visits to ICO in the surgical treatment of complex gynecologic pathologies. At our host's request, this visit also included partnering in the surgical treatment of breast cancer. The U.S. mission team included two surgeons, one anesthesiologist, a surgical nurse, medical interpreter, and a team chaplain/ acompañante, led by the Solidarity Bridge Director of Gynecologic and General Surgery Programs. Puente de Solidaridad staff included a social worker and the PdS Executive Director. PdS also arranged the fulltime assistance of a volunteer Bolivian interpreter.

II. Goals

- a. Increase general capacities in the diagnosis and surgical treatment of complex gynecologic pathologies, in particular suspected or confirmed gynecologic cancers.
- b. Building on targeted training and equipping begun in 2022, advance the capacity of the local team to perform laparoscopic hysterectomies.
- c. Identify equipment, training, and other needs to reinforce ICO's capacity to diagnose and surgically treat breast cancer.
- d. Build relationships of mutually-enriching solidarity among visiting medical professionals, Solidarity Bridge and Puente de Solidaridad staff, and ICO medical professionals and staff.
- e. Enhance the healing process for Bolivian patients and their families through comfort and spiritual support while accompanying them through the surgical treatment process.

III. Summary of Activities

- a. *Increase capacities in the diagnosis and surgical treatment of complex gynecologic pathologies, in particular suspected or confirmed gynecologic cancers.*

The ICO gynecology service is staffed by gynecologists who received limited formal training in oncology. As a gynecologic oncologist, Dr. Erin Stevens began in 2022 to assess their base knowledge (which varies among the staff) and, from that foundation, mentor them in the diagnosis and treatment of complex conditions including cancers. This year, that work began virtually a few weeks before the mission with discussion over Zoom of some of the patient cases. It continued on the first day at the hospital when the visiting and host professionals met with each patient and finalized surgical plans. Pathologies addressed included endometrial hyperplasia, fibroids, ovarian tumors, and various stages of cervical cancer.

- b. *Building on targeted training and equipping begun in 2022, advance the capacity of the local team to perform laparoscopic hysterectomies.*

By the end of the 2022 mission trip, two of the ICO gynecologists, Dr. Isabel Huaygua and Dr. Isabel Quinteros, had demonstrated moderate command of the basic steps in laparoscopic hysterectomy. Our 2023 visit aspired to build on that progress. Six laparoscopic hysterectomies were performed, during which Dr. Stevens demonstrated and the ICO partners gradually assumed roles in the surgeries, including management of potentially complicating scenarios. Dr. Gay Garrett added instruction around the manipulation of laparoscopes and laparoscopic instruments. By the close of the week, Dr. Stevens was pleased to enumerate a checklist of skills in which the ICO team demonstrated proficiency, including: patient positioning, uterine manipulator insertion, trocar placement, fallopian tube and ovary dissection, and identification and preparation of uterine and bladder anatomy. This was considered significant progress for one week of training.

- c. *Identify equipment, training, and other needs to reinforce the ICO's capacity to diagnose and surgically treat breast cancer.*

Experienced missionary Dr. Gay Garrett joined the US team in response to the ICO request for assistance in the management of breast cancer. Dr. Garrett participated in pre-surgical evaluations (over Zoom prior to arrival and in person) and surgeries for five breast cancer patients. Even when diagnosed at early stages, many patients in the region do not return for treatment until their cancer has advanced and often metastasized. For that reason, many of the breast surgeries performed at ICO are classified as palliative, limited to removing the tumors and performing sentinel node dissections and biopsies. Nevertheless, these surgeries immensely improve the immediate health and wellbeing of the patients. After observing the local surgeons in the first surgery, Dr. Garrett demonstrated her own techniques and shared tips to optimize surgical safety and outcomes.

- d. *Build relationships of mutually-enriching solidarity among visiting medical professionals, Solidarity Bridge and Puente de Solidaridad staff, and ICO medical professionals and staff.*

As the week unfolded, the visiting team became vividly aware of many extra challenges faced by their ICO peers beyond the normal toll of cancer care. For example, the medical team is adapting to new health ministry regulations regarding which patients may be referred to ICO for treatment. The ICO is no longer authorized to organize cancer screening campaigns itself, and patients may only be referred after their cancer diagnosis has been confirmed elsewhere. This often means that patients arrive in more advanced and complex stages which are more difficult to treat and less likely to achieve favorable outcomes. Our hosts noted that it was gratifying to share their frustrations with our US teammates, who as fellow medical professionals could understand the implications. The US missionaries shared their own moral injuries at being limited in fulfilling their healing vocations in their home practices. These exchanges were just one way that all those connected to this cross-cultural encounter built bonds of solidarity and understanding, while supporting one another toward the common goal of caring for those in need.

- e. *Enhance the healing process for Bolivian patients and their families through comfort and spiritual support while accompanying them through the surgical treatment process.*

In addition to the time dedicated by the surgical team to meet, listen to, answer questions, and provide compassionate medical care to each patient, the women and families were also accompanied throughout the week by the Puente de Solidaridad social worker, Marizol Mamani, and the mission team chaplain, Dr. Kim Grahl. This included home visits by Ms. Mamani and Dr. Grahl before several of the surgeries. Dr. Grahl observed that, during those visits, many of the women expressed deep fears and asked pointed questions around their upcoming procedures, even when they had remained stoic during their evaluation at the hospital. The entire team strived to

ensure that each patient entered her surgery fully informed and comfortable with her treatment plan, including understanding the limitations in the case of patients undergoing palliative surgery. Post-op surgical team rounds and visits by Ms. Mamani and Dr. Grahl provided continued accompaniment until each patient was discharged. One patient was personally escorted home by Ms. Mamani who also delivered care supplies for the patient and her bed-ridden mother at home.

IV. Patients served



Juana surrounded by her father, ICO intern Joseph Peñaloza, Kim Grahl, and Juana's daughter Daysi, a 19-year-old medical student.

Thirteen surgeries were completed, including eight gynecologic and five breast cancer surgeries. Patients ranged in age from 37 to 80, with an average age of 54. Each of the women was discharged within 48 hours of surgery and no complications have been reported as of one month following the final discharge.

One of the women served is Juana, 46, a proud and independent single mother of three girls. Juana is an artisan, hand-crafting *tulmas* – traditional Aymara hair-braid decorations with colorful pom poms, worn in pairs to represent the Aymaran principle of duality.

Juana's daily life entails a lot of walking – the route between her home and the closest bus stop includes a 15-minute hike over rough terrain (roads are under construction and currently impassable), and she is on her feet for hours selling her products in the streets and at markets throughout the region. This became increasingly difficult in recent months as she suffered debilitating pain and other effects of endometrial hyperplasia. She was told she needed a hysterectomy, but the conventional surgery offered at the public women's hospital would leave her with a large incision requiring weeks of rest and

recovery. Even returning home from the hospital would be a challenge.

The surgical campaign organized around our team's week of training and service at ICO offered a unique opportunity for Juana to undergo a laparoscopic hysterectomy in a public hospital. The minimally invasive approach avoids a large incision, helping Juana get back on her feet sooner. It also reduces her risk of post-surgical infection, which is another big concern given the hygiene challenges posed by the dusty hillsides and limited water in Juana's neighborhood.

Juana's surgery was performed by ICO gynecologists Dr. Tatiana Mina and Dr. Isabel Huaygua and missionary Dr. Erin Stevens. Juana was discharged the following day and is recovering well at home.

V. Future Outlook

Pending a formal invitation and agreements with the Chuquisaca health authorities, all parties agreed to continue the training advanced during this mission trip in 2024. Dr. Stevens outlined next surgical training goals and RN Jessica Waldo elaborated a list of nurse training goals, both around the objective to consolidate local capacity to perform laparoscopic hysterectomies. Regarding breast surgery, Dr. Garrett will assist in the discernment of strategies to continue to support the ICO. Equipment and supply gaps were also noted for ongoing procurement to benefit ICO.

VI. Thank You to Our Contributors

Key equipment and supplies were donated for use on this trip and to reinforce ICO capacities to serve patients going forward. In-kind donors include MAP International, Americares, Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach, missionaries Gay Garrett, Erin Stevens, and Jessica Waldo, and others. We are also indebted to each of our financial supporters, volunteers, and others who together make our work possible.

VII. Team Lists

Solidarity Bridge/ Puente de Solidaridad team:

Patricia Vargas, PdS Executive Director
Marizol Mamani, PdS Social Worker
Jodi Grahl, Director, SB Gynecologic and General Surgery Programs
Dr. Gay Garrett, Breast Surgeon, Trip Medical Director
Dr. Erin Stevens, Gynecologic Oncologist
Dr. Richard Stern, Anesthesiologist
RN Jessica Waldo, Surgical Nurse
Dr. Kim Grahl, Internal Medicine, Chaplain/ Acompañante
Isabel Sánchez-Tembleque Wood, Medical Interpreter
Dr. Berbely Pino, local volunteer interpreter

ICO surgical team:

Dr. Isabel Huaygua, Chief of Gynecology
Dr. María Eugenia Villarroel, Chief of Medicine
Dr. Wilfredo Campos, General Surgeon and lead Breast Surgeon
Dr. Isabel Quinteros, Gynecologist
Dr. Tatiana Mina, Gynecologist
Dr. Adriana Bedoya, Anesthesiologist
Dr. Kirsy Prudencio, Anesthesiologist
Dr. Milton Cortes, Gynecology Resident
Valeriana Gallardo, Lead surgical nurse
Esther Torres, Circulating nurse
Fernando Espinoza, Circulating nurse
Joselyn Velazquez, Circulating nurse
Interns Dr. Juseph Peñaloza, Dr. Isabel Mamani, and Dr. Manuel Fuentes

We also recognize the indispensable contributions of the ICO's sterilization and laundry services, hematology and pathology laboratories, social work and administration, and the entire body of ICO nurses, doctors. and staff.

