

Costa Rica International Rotation Blog

July 10th, 2014

I'm off to a great start here in Costa Rica. As part of our residency curriculum, the Radiation Medicine and Applied Sciences Department here at UCSD has sponsored a 1-month international rotation here in Costa Rica. It is amazing to be given the opportunity to go literally anywhere in the world to gain an appreciation of how radiation oncology is practiced. I thought I'd put into practice the lessons I've learned in our residency Spanish didactics and travel to a Spanish speaking country. I thought Costa Rica would be a great place to see how cancer treatment is modernizing in the developing world and this rotation is turning out exactly as I had hoped.

My contact for the rotation has been Dr. Luis Garcia. He had practiced radiation oncology for several years within the national health care system (the "Caja") and was the head of postgraduate education for a while. A few years ago decided to try private practice radiation oncology and opened his own practice. He is the only purely private practice radiation oncologist in the country! He brought the first linear accelerator into Costa Rica and his clinic is the only location in the country where IMRT is routinely practiced. I have been very impressed with the quality of the staff, including physicist (Isaac), dosimetrist (Gabriel) and therapists. Here is a picture of me with Dr. Garcia at his ranch (finca) outside of San Jose. He was king enough to invite me with my entire family out over a weekend for a Costa Rica-style barbeque.



August 1st, 2014

While I spent Mondays with Dr. Garcia in his private practice clinic, I spend the rest of the week getting connected with the national radiation oncology program. It constitutes the entire remaining radiation treatment capabilities in the country and consists of 12 radiation oncologists, 7 residents, 4 linear accelerators, 2 cobalt machines and Ir-192 HDR equipment for brachytherapy. They recently opened a new building completely dedicated to cancer care and located right behind Costa Rica's largest hospital, seen here.



It is amazing to think that I have been able to meet every radiation oncologist practicing in the entire country! I am very grateful to Dra. Cordero (Department Chief) and Dr. Blanco (Residency program director), for allowing me to spend so much time with them. The whole staff is very busy and their linear accelerators are treating patients from 6 am to 10 pm every night to try and meet the demand of the entire country. They have two dedicated CT simulators, treat patients every 12 minutes, and interestingly, divide patients by body site on each machine to improve efficiency (head and neck, pelvis, etc.). Yesterday, I was also able to spend some time with Dra. Katia Montero, who handles a big part of the brachytherapy load with a large cervical cancer disease burden. She treats expertly with Ir-192 HDR with a tandem and ring applicator. I also have been able to attend numerous multidisciplinary conferences including prostate/GU, GI, GYN, and here at a head and neck tumor board.



August 7th, 2014

I can't believe my month in Costa Rica is over! It has been a life-changing experience and I hope to continue the relationships I have made here for a lifetime. Moreover, I have been interested to learn more about ALATRO (Asociacion Latinoamericana de Terapia Radiante Oncologica), the Latin American arm of ASTRO, especially since Dr. Mundt (our Chair) and Dr. Kevin Murphy have been presenters and attendees at their meetings! I hope to be able to join them and look forward to supporting this organization throughout my career. But, for now, it's time to say goodbye. I will miss the resident conferences like this one below; where we discussed Gastric

Cancer treatment (Costa Rica has the 2nd highest rate of gastric cancer in the world).



Finally, I wanted to end with some photos of me with Dr. Blanco and some of the residents (Arnoldo, Brigitte, and Daniel), who have been so hospitable and taught me so much. Until we meet again!



