



The natural, herbal remedies of Cusco, Peru

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Local women showing the traditional way of dyeing garments. This included cacti parasites, flowers, roots, and other plants

Cusco, Peru

Population: : 428,450

Elevation: 11,200 ft

Main languages: Spanish, Quescha

Historic capital of the Incan empire until the 16th century

Now considered a “World Heritage Site” by UNESCO in 1983



Hospital de Contingencia



Rotation at Internal Medicine -

Separated into “Varones” and “Mujeres”, a men’s ward and woman’s ward

One large room with 12 beds each, one bathroom per room

Rounds began at 8 am, concluded around lunchtime

Interns split the floor roughly half and half

Herbal remedies



- Herbal and plant based remedies were present in conversation throughout the hospital, on hikes, and around Cusco
- Many people of Cusco decide on herbal remedies first before coming to the doctor
- Many consisted of teas, roots, and fruits
- Due to this persistent theme throughout my stay in Cusco, comparing the culture of a primarily naturopathic medicinal culture compared to the homeopathic medicinal culture of the US is my topic of choice

Naturopathic remedies of Cusco

While at the hospital, it was quickly apparent that the overall culture as it related to medicine was vastly different than in the US

Most patients had tried all herbal remedies at their disposal before visiting the doctor

This was highly important to keep in context when communicating with patients and offering recommendations – compromising on a treatment plan was essential after they left the hospital



A photo of our hiking guide at the top of the Salkantay mountain making an offering to Pachamama and the various mountains for ensuring us safe passage. The rocks must be taken at the beginning of the hike at the river.

Primary info I learned

Individual level – Many of the locals visited the San Pedro market or other local markets that contained plant, powder, tea remedies first before visiting the pharmacy. For example, altitude sickness was sworn to be cured by muna tea, a local plant native to the area. Coca leaves were also popular for both the altitude and to maintain energy

Community level- The pharmacies were strategically placed near these herbal marketplaces so that when the doctor recommended prescription pills, s/he could also recommend these herbal supplements that the patient could obtain all in close proximity to one another

System level- While there was corruption that occurred at the government level (we originally were supposed to work at another hospital but local authorities had run away with the money to fund the construction), overall I observed a great balance of western/eastern medicine combining. This included the acceptance and also practice of these different alternative methods among the locals including the doctors.



An advertisement in a pharmacy near the San Pedro market about natural remedies for altitude sickness “mal de altura”

Conclusions



View of Cusco, Peru from outside an animal sanctuary

My experience in Cusco was a great example of how modern medicine many times must adapt to the communities and systems that are already in place. I entered this country believing our way of medicine was the “correct” way, and quickly found out that just because another culture’s answer to a particular diagnosis or pathology is different, doesn’t mean it is incorrect.

Most profound clinical experience

In the women's ward (mujeres), of the 12 beds occupied, 4 were admitted for complications of lupus one day. They all presented in a different way- one had respiratory complications, one had kidney complications, one was admitted for cardiac causes, and the last had anemic complications. The attendings informed me that SLE is extremely common in Cusco.



The three of us at Hospital Contingencia prior to rounding

Most profound cultural experience

The island of Tequile

This is an island on Lake Titicaca of ~2,000 inhabitants. Their cultural beliefs were fascinating. This included:

- The women would choose a suitor based on the quality of the hat he could knit. The single men would walk around the island constantly knitting, the women would be constantly spinning wool
- You could easily identify a single, married, or chief of a given village based on the hat they wore
- The women also had specific colors of skirts they were to wear based on their marital status
- Most spoke quechua



The inhabitants of the island of Tequile performing a traditional dance before lunch was served

References

<http://www.diresacusco.gob.pe/new/archivos/tag/hospital-de-contingencia>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cusco>

<http://www.newperuvian.com/drinking-coca-tea-drug-test-results/>



The Cusco Crew after a 5 day hike to Machu Picchu