

PRINT-OSF HealthCare and U of I train future doctors to innovate for equity in medicine

Health care in the U.S. is facing challenges of physician shortages, chronic diseases and access in rural communities. Some of those same challenges exist in low-resource global communities, which is why OSF HealthCare and the University of Illinois College of Medicine Peoria (UICOMP) have partnered for an [Equity Innovation Medicine](#) (EquiMED) program.

OSF HealthCare recently hosted University of Illinois System President Tim Killeen and leaders from the system universities in Peoria, Chicago, Springfield and Urbana-Champaign to highlight the Equity Innovation Medicine (EquiMED) program and its expanding impact on health care to rural and underserved communities in Illinois. The program exposes medical students to individuals living in medically under-resourced communities in the U.S. and abroad, and it challenges students to come up with sustainable solutions to a health issue.

The four-year program for select medical students is led by John Vozenilek, MD, of [OSF Innovation](#), who says the curriculum and experiences teach innovation through problem solving and provide skills alumni take into their residencies and practices.

"They are using their innovation skillset every single day. She (a former student at a recent gathering) said that she is using these innovation tools when she interviews patients to go deeper into their needs so she can think of new solutions to their problems."

Devon Izquierdo, a fourth-year medical student at UICOMP, spent time in the São Paulo area of Brazil meeting with the [Guarani](#) people, who have a territory in the northwestern part of the city called [Jaraguá](#). The biggest problems they face are health literacy and mistrust of traditional medicine.

Izquierdo says they decided to focus on a solution that involved children.

"Because they seemed more open and inviting to outsiders and we decided to create an educational game where they would learn how to treat common ailments like stomach aches, not only with their traditional medicine, but also with evidence-based medicine that we use in our Western culture and hopefully disseminate that information to the adult population as well."

Izquierdo and other students met with the local shaman and other key stakeholders to get input. They decided the best approach might be to create a game.

"We worked with one of the healers, Sonja Christina, as well as some of the leadership – her son Jefferson – to really get their input on the game and see what kids would really get excited about." She adds, "So the next step would be to develop a prototype and bring it back to the community to see, does it really work, do they really enjoy it and where can we adjust as needed."

Izquierdo will work with a team at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois – an academic partner of OSF HealthCare – that has expertise in game theory and development. Meanwhile, she says the EquiMED program taught her the valuable lesson of listening critically and continuously.

"Continue to have a conversation. Build trust in the community and really come up with a solution together because, ultimately, we want to create a solution that they're going to use – that really solves the issue that they want. We can always come in with ideas and a high-tech solution but if it's not feasible and they're not going to use it, are we really solving the problem that we're trying to solve?"

Ben Mendez, another fourth-year EquiMED student worked in another region outside of São Paulo, Brazil – an area challenged with having safe drinking water. Mendez says he's working to develop a water quality monitoring system using sensors and a communication tool to provide alerts when water quality drops to dangerous levels. In that case, private, non-profit organizations could step in to provide safe drinking water.

Mendez says it's not ideal, but it is the most feasible, sustainable option.

"Instead of completely reshaping the infrastructure that doesn't exist there, we're just trying to give them a way to get ahead of a problem before it starts and alert them and give them a fighting chance to not drink this contaminated water essentially."

It's a practical approach and a lesson he's learned by working in vulnerable communities. Mendez predicts he'll use that approach as he practices medicine in the future.

"So understanding how to work within the constraints of a financially driven system, which is the reality we're in, will prepare me better for my residency and helping my career in finding solutions that we can still keep these basic services that we must as providers, but do it in a way that we can justify the cost and keep the lights on essentially."

Students also stress importance of developing soft skills, such as listening and collaborating, says Dr. Vozenilek.

"So, this idea of co-design, to really get to the patients' needs and to really understand them fully and then design with the patient, the solution. Now that's relevant for very complicated type of treatment paths that require a lot of technology, but it's also extremely important for the types of simple things we do every day to keep ourselves and our loved ones healthy."

At the most recent meeting of collaborative partners, leaders also discussed how in the future they might align EquiMED efforts with national health priorities, such as the Food as Medicine initiative and exploring opportunities for collaboration with agricultural programs.