

World Travelers

WCM faculty give Cornell undergrads first-person perspectives on global health



MEDICAL MENTORS: WCM faculty Eric Brumberger, MD (above center), and Gunisha Kaur, MD '10, chat with students in the Ithaca global health class. Left: Kaur lectures on the unintended consequences of social action.

In a lecture hall on the Ithaca campus, an audience of seventy-five undergrads listens with rapt attention as anesthesiologist Eric Brumberger, MD, offers a painful lesson in good intentions gone awry. Seven years ago, he tells them, he was part of a medical mission to Ghana—organized by an outside group that he met through a colleague—that performed successful surgeries on dozens of children. When the doctors and nurses encountered a man who was suffering from a long-untreated hernia that severely compromised his quality of life, they felt a duty to help. The patient was eager for relief, the operation seemed straightforward, and the procedure went reasonably well—but afterward, he began bleeding internally. “He didn’t survive the night,” says Brumberger, an assistant professor of anesthesiology at Weill Cornell Medicine and director of the department’s residency program. “We didn’t have the resources, equipment, drugs, or blood products needed to keep him alive. We watched—horried, shamed, guilt-ridden—as this otherwise healthy person, who in the U.S. would have gone home that same day, died in front of us. That experience has informed the way I’ve approached global health work ever since.”

Brumberger spoke in April as part of Global Health Case Studies, a new course he co-founded that brings WCM faculty to Ithaca to discuss the topic from a comprehensive perspective—marrying medical disciplines like public health and epidemiology with such fields as anthropology, history, and economics. Launched in an abbreviated pilot version in spring 2016, the class has proved highly popular; while Brumberger and co-founder Gunisha Kaur, MD '10, expected two dozen or so students to enroll, they got three times that many. “The most rewarding experience has been interacting with the doctors,” says student Olivia Lee, an aspiring physician majoring in human development who took the class her senior spring and also served as a teaching assistant. “Being able to talk with them about how they approach global health and how their experiences as doctors have shaped their thinking has been really

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inspiring, because I’d like to do the sort of work they’re doing.”

Offered through the College of Human Ecology’s Division of Nutritional Sciences, the course was developed with the aid of grants from the Ithaca campus’s Mario Enaudi Center for International Studies and the office of its vice provost for international affairs. Lecturers have included Madelon Finkel, PhD, professor of clinical healthcare policy and research (who spoke about cervical cancer screening in impoverished rural areas), and James Gallagher, MD, associate professor of clinical surgery (who discussed his experiences in Tanzania, including setting up a burn center there). From a show of hands during one class—the one in which Brumberger and Kaur spoke about the unintended consequences of social action, as exemplified by the death of the Ghanaian hernia patient—roughly two-thirds of its students aim to be MDs. “We know that some of these students are going to do work in global health,” says Kaur, an instructor in anesthesiology,

“and we hope that what they gain from this approach is the ability to do it more responsibly and sustainably by understanding the social, political, economic, and environmental context of the places in which they work.”

This fall, the class is being offered in a full-semester form, with enrollment capped at 125. Brumberger and Kaur—both undergraduate alumni of Cornell—have retooled it a bit, incorporating lessons they learned from the pilot version; for instance, they’ve halved the amount of required reading, having realized that what they assigned was more appropriate for the med students and residents whom they’re accustomed to teaching. “As an undergraduate, I would have loved access to the medical college and its faculty,” says Kaur, noting that several students from the course’s first iteration came to WCM to conduct research over the summer. “When I was at Cornell, there was very little connection between the two campuses. Having something like this course bridges that gap really well.” ■

—Beth Saulnier

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