



*ECU PA student Amy Petticrew, left, sits with other visiting providers outside a health post mobile clinic in Belize. (Contributed photos)*

## **ELECTIVE EXPERIENCE**

### **PA students learn in immersive, international setting**

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**By Lauren Edmondson**

**College of Allied Health Sciences**

Two students in East Carolina University's physician assistant studies program traveled to Belize this summer to volunteer and immerse themselves in a medical atmosphere quite different from eastern North Carolina.

Amy Petticrew and Cara Bailey, both seniors in the PA program who will graduate in December, spent a month working in Punta Gorda – a small rural town located in the Toledo

district of Belize. The two worked mostly at Hillside Health Clinic there, treating East Indian and Mayan Belizean patients from newborns to senior citizens, with on-site doctors approving their assessments and plans.

The PA students saw routine complaints as well as worms, botflies, and leishmaniasis, a skin disease spread by parasites such as sandflies. Of all the infections, conditions and ailments they treated, Petticrew said the most unique thing she saw was a cutaneous myiasis, a botfly larvae growing in the scalp of a patient.



*Cara Bailey, left, and Amy Petticrew pose on the coast of Belize during their international clinic rotation with the Department of Physician Assistant Studies.*

Hillside Health Clinic was started by an American church and staffs one full-time doctor, several temporary doctors from the U.S. and United Kingdom, and a full-time physical therapist.

Petticrew and Bailey took advantage of the PA program's international rotation elective to serve in Belize's unique atmosphere. While both students paid tuition, dorm housing was provided for them.

Along with their time at Hillside, the group also visited mobile clinics in various Mayan villages where the students saw pigs, chickens, palapa-roofed houses and women dressed in traditional Mayan garb.

"We visited overnight clinics in distant villages where Peace Corps volunteers were stationed and there is no running water, electricity or air conditioning," said Petticrew.

Petticrew and Bailey also enjoyed fun activities on their weekends away from the clinic. The pair visited Guatemala and the Rio Dulce, attended the National Chocolate Festival and enjoyed activities such as snorkeling, zip-lining, water tubing and cave swimming.

Despite all the possibilities offered in Belize, Petticrew said she most enjoyed working in the clinic.

"My favorite part was being so immersed in such traditional culture without modern-day amenities and seeing the huge variety of cultures that have learned to live off the land in Belize," she said. "The opportunity for an international rotation is one of the reasons I chose to attend ECU."

The international elective practicum is offered as part of the clinical curriculum in the PA program. Several students are participating in the 2014-2015 academic year with even more on the waiting list for next year.

"We have been offering the international elective since 2001 and have had many students take the opportunity to experience a new culture and gain an understanding of practicing medicine with very limited resources," said Clinical Education Coordinator Julie Daniel-Yount. "The work is rewarding and allows them to grow as medical providers as they work alongside other disciplines to help the patients there. The Hillside staff and volunteer preceptors are a dedicated and talented group, and they do an excellent job of teaching our PA students during their month-long rotation."

PA students are required to complete two elective practicums during the clinical year that may consist of two stateside electives, one stateside and one international elective, or two international electives. International clinics screen applicants and accept a predetermined number of students per rotation.

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1001 E. Fifth St. | Greenville, NC 27858 USA | 252.328.6481