

A Letter from Dr. Chow

At nearly ten thousand feet above sea level, Quito and its surrounding mountains are breathtaking. Literally. The air is so thin that the usual aerobic workout for even a seasoned gym rat can end precipitously in dizzy gasps and a nauseating headache. Some believe the low oxygen levels may even be a cause of increased birth defects, such as microtia. Microtia is deformity of the ear. Children with microtia are often subject to ridicule at best, and in Ecuador, can become social outcasts who are abandoned by their families.

I had the opportunity to travel to Ecuador as part of an annual medical mission that provides highly specialized surgeries required to build ears for these children. This year, we were nearly thirty in number, and yet we were overwhelmed by the number of children and their families who traveled up to hundreds of miles by any means available to wait all day for the chance of having surgery. We still had to turn so many away.

Each surgical reconstruction takes place over four stages. And because of the months of healing which must take place before each successive surgery, the kids in Quito require at least four years before they can see their fully reconstructed ears. The wait is mind-boggling.

But I loved it. Working together with other surgeons as well as anesthesiologists, nurse anesthetists, operating room and recovery nurses, scrub techs, and a squadron of dedicated volunteers, we performed over seventy surgeries in all. We held to a strict schedule to accomplish what we could given the limited time and supplies.

The children and their families were so appreciative. There were happy hugs and hand-written letters, roses and ruddy smiles. Yet what I noticed most were the eyes, even as I spent my time cleaning and examining the new ears. There was an earnest happiness there, something that made me feel as though they had given me something I had never had but always missed. I still can't place just what it is, but I'm forever grateful for the opportunity these children have given me. It's enough to take one's breath away.

~Jen Chow, M.D.