Development of a multidisciplinary assessment service for older people in Peru, a rapidly developing country with an ageing population

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An idea is born
I visited Moyobamba, Peru in 2010, after leaving Geriatric Medicine at ST5 and before beginning General Practice ST training. I spent around three months in the town, based in the Clinic San Lucas, an established local health clinic, attending to elderly patients and through this became aware of the health needs of the older population. There was very little specific or coordinated elderly medicine attention or multidisciplinary care but there was a desire amongst the Clinic staff to fill this growing gap. We began designing possible interventions, I decided to request Out of Programme Experience (OOPE) and, after this was granted by NHS Education for Scotland, we planned a scientific study to formally assess the health needs of the elderly population.

The adventure begins
I arrived in September 2012 and we launched the project following a series of planning meetings. We recruited study patients and began a geriatric exercise class with the help of a visiting UK Occupational Therapist who provided the structure and led the first few sessions. The exercise classes proved popular and we also took advantage of the captive audience to educate each week on health topics pertinent to the older population. Simultaneously, we launched a course for health promoters from the local community, focusing on the importance of caring for older people. The course also covered many major topics in Geriatric medicine, from Parkinson's to dementia to depression.

Learning, learning and more learning
I've not just learned about medicine during this time but also about managing people, managing a project and the challenges of developing a medical service in a cross cultural setting. It was a fantastic experience with benefits both personally and professionally. Learning ranged from the structures of the health systems in Peru, the health problems in Peru to how to lead exercise classes and perform basic Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy assessments to how to handle formal social situations in another language and culture. I've also learned about leadership, strategising and the challenges of introducing new ideas and technology to a community.

What no one told me I'd have to do
It wasn't part of the plan but I was somehow asked to be the guest of honour at an old folks' Christmas party. Unavoidably, I had to stand at the front, holding hands with the committee whilst singing along to 'Sound of silence' on the Pan Pipes while the elderly folk waved balloons. All in the name of networking and getting the group leader, who was dressed up as a clown, onside to partner with us in the elderly medicine project!

Meeting the needs and thinking of the future
I then began to train a local nurse technician to assess elderly patients using a protocolised version of the Barthel index and perform a basic mobility assessment. This was to replicate the work of an Occupational Therapist, a role which is practically unheard of in Peru. We acquired a large stock of walking sticks and zimmer frames as well as some other smaller adaptive equipment which, prior to the project beginning, were impossible to source in Moyobamba. She was trained to assess the need for equipment and instruct on its correct usage. Depending on the outcome of the initial assessment she could also recommend medical, physiotherapy or nursing attention. We had many successes with people showing large improvements in mobility from the introduction of walking equipment and benefiting from good nursing care and physiotherapy.

The project setup is now such that it is able to deliver this much needed, evidence based care to the community of Moyobamba. Professionals we were able to deliver this much needed, service, equipment and access to multi-disciplinary support. We identified from the study that older people in Moyobamba had mobility problems and functional difficulties and with the introduction of the assessment service, equipment and access to multi-disciplinary professionals we were able to deliver this much needed, evidence based care to the community of Moyobamba.

The Organisation
The appeal of working with the Clinic San Lucas was the opportunity to partner with a well established, respected and visionary local clinic to help begin a project that my specific skills and background were suited to help develop. The most important detail, to my mind, was the existing idea by the local staff which I could help give momentum, structure and ideas to over a limited time frame with the intention of leaving a locally-run project in place.

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Programa del Adulto Mayor/Program for Elderly People.
Association San Lucas www.sanlucasperu.org
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Life in Peru www.karensperuramblings.blogspot.com