Cultural Competence, Experience and Attitude

The life and work of Dr. Hector Garcia clearly had a message about the importance of cultural competence, not just in Hispanic culture, but in the quality of care to all cultures. There are many ways to go about leading movements and promoting ideas, but as we all know, actions speak louder than words and Dr. Garcia did just this.

Many nights working late, Dr. Garcia would be called to see patients, most often, Hispanic patients. Each time, Dr. Garcia, regardless of the hour or situation, would dress himself as professionally as possible – with dress shirt and tie – before he went to see his patient. Of course, to his colleagues, this behavior was odd - no one really saw the point in taking the time to put on such nice attire just to go see a patient in the middle of the night. When questioned as to why he did this, Dr. Garcia replied with a message to his colleagues that, to his Hispanic patients, putting on a dress shirt and tie meant something to them. For most of his patients were indigent and were rarely taken care of by professionals who wore such clothing. So to them, the dress shirt and a tie was a symbol of a high level of care and professionalism, but to his colleagues, Dr. Garcia’s efforts with his attire was just apart of his commitment to civil rights and quality of care to all. And today, the message of Dr. Garcia’s message persists because this example of his action for civil rights was shared by one of his non-Hispanic colleagues many years later to my first year medical school class at the end of a lecture. I guess it meant
something to me also because I do not remember the name of the lecturer or even what the
lecture was about, but I remember the message of his first-hand story very well. My
understanding of the importance of cultural competence has been refined many times and it is
my hope that I display my belief in the message of Dr. Hector P. Garcia.

Just like anything else, my understanding of cultural competence first began with ideas.
Ideas about a certain culture or cultures spawned from readings, discussions, and all sorts of
research initiatives. Thereafter, I would take the ideas learned to that respective culture and find
out just how wrong my educated ideas were. For me, I now believe there are mainly two things
necessary in the understanding of cultural competence: experience and attitude. You must
experience cultures foreign to you firsthand in order to unlock unconscious presets you did not
know you had. Additionally, and possibly more important, is attitude - an attitude that allows an
open mind and non-judgmental eyes, ears, and emotions to learn about a different culture. I
believe my attitude has been refined many times through my desire to learn about other ways of
life and how differences are not necessarily disagreements and that there is no one exact, correct
way to live.

In my life, I have come to believe these things through many experiences in travel and by
being active in the local communities in which I have lived. In regard to travel, I think Mark
Twain may have put my opinion best: “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-
mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome,
charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the
earth all one's lifetime.” I have been fortunate enough to have the opportunity to travel to many
places in the world such as: Canada, Costa Rica, England, France, Hong Kong, Macau, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama and Thailand. I do not mention these places to boast, but to provide a list of the diversity I have been exposed to. When I have gone to these places, my outlook has not been for tourism and vacation, but instead a unique opportunity to learn about life in a different culture. Of course, I recognize that the time spent in these places was a temporary circumstance, but after only a few days here and there of sleeping in shacks, showering with buckets, and traveling everywhere on foot, you still are left with a lasting impression. The deciding factor as to whether it changed you or not is the action you take afterwards – first being thankful for clean water, sound living quarters, and the best educational opportunities in the world and second, by doing something to help those in need in your community and when the time comes, outside of your community. To put it in other words: we do not always need to go elsewhere to help out, the true servant first looks around in their surrounding community for avenues of opportunity – “we are to think globally and act locally.”

As a health professional student in Galveston, I think there are many unique and special opportunities to serve others at places such as St. Vincent’s clinic, the local elementary, middle, and high schools, and all around the UTMB campus with other students, professors, and patients. I have attempted to achieve a fair balance between time spent in helping out and studying for school. I often volunteer at St. Vincent’s clinic, have gone into some of the local middle schools to teach kids about sex education and nutrition, and participated in a few other service endeavors such as Community Immunity. And much like the evolving demographic of the U.S.A, in Galveston there is a rich mix of cultures that combine to create a single unique culture. In my
experience here I have met people from all parts of the world. And although I may not relate completely to each of these cultures, it is my attitude and open mind that allows each of these interactions to contribute to my understanding of cultural competence.

In addition to acting locally, I have sought travel and service opportunities in many places. I have volunteered in the border healthcare efforts with Frontera de Salud, lead a service project in underserved communities in San Jose, Costa Rica, and done parasite research in Mexico City, Mexico. With Frontera, I was educated about the disparities of healthcare that exist in the south Texas border zones and the complexities of indigent healthcare policy. In Costa Rica, I lead a door to door service project in an underserved Nicaraguan migrant worker establishment with the goal of educating the people there about health prevention measures and provided basic healthcare that they were not entitled to by the Costa Rican government. In Mexico City, I spent a summer doing parasite research in order to help stop the spread of the number one cause of juvenile epilepsy in Mexico.

It is my hope that I have been able to provide compelling examples of my skills and the foundations of my thought in understanding cultural competence. Much like the efforts of Dr. Garcia, I have sought to display my belief in quality healthcare to all and have attempted to do it through action – both in local and global communities.