

Observing Obstetrics Confronting Challenges: A Summer in South Africa



Janna Stephan's summer in South Africa did not get off to an easy start. After experiencing “abject terror” for the few weeks leading up to her departure, Janna worked hard to prepare for her Downs Fellowship research. Gathering materials ranging from clinical supplies to mental energy to research skills, Janna left to study HIV transmission in an obstetric ward in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

“When I landed, I was so jetlagged that I don't remember having any thoughts for three days,” recalls Janna. Arriving in the village, which she describes as a “different world,” she asked herself, “Why did I think this was a good idea?” Here I was: blond, white girl in this all Zulu-speaking ward... I don't think I've ever been in such a race-conscious place.”

In the end, Janna exclaims, “Everything went really, really well!” Not only did she learn a few key phrases of Zulu (“I definitely picked

up ‘push’ and ‘breathe’”), but she also came to understand the cultural and linguistic subtleties that characterize the rural region where she worked. As Janna explains, the Zulu dialect in the region requires that certain individuals be addressed with different grammar, a realization that served her well. “I tried to be really sensitive in my questions,” she says, an approach that allowed her to learn from everyone she encountered.

Janna's research highlights document the obstetrical practices and procedures currently observed at the Church of Scotland Hospital and analyzes the attention paid to potential HIV transmission. The need for such research is acute: Janna cites South Africans' migratory work patterns, lack of access to antiretroviral therapy, and gender inequality as key factors in the “disproportionate” impact of HIV and AIDS on that nation. Janna's study documents her observations and goes on to provide impetus for further study and potential interventions to reduce transmission of HIV/AIDS from mother to child, from mother to mother, and from mother to health care worker.

On a personal level, Janna accomplished more than any poster presentation or master's thesis can encapsulate. Over the summer, she also came to understand more fully her capacity for adaptation and learning. Impressed by the resourcefulness of those she worked with at the hospital, Janna now tells herself, “You can't ever say, ‘This is impossible, I can't do it.’” 🏠

Patients and health-care workers at the Church of Scotland Hospital in Tugela Ferry, KwaZulu-Natal

