



Barbara A. Winkler, MD, FCAP

Sanctuary from Cervical Cancer

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The ruins of Machu Picchu in the Andes Mountains northwest of Cusco, Peru, are the stuff of myth. Archaeologists, historians, and tourists from around the globe are drawn to the mesmerizing beauty and legendary peace to be found near the “Lost City of the Incas.”

The health care providers and other volunteers, who travel to Cusco each summer under the auspices of the nonprofit International Cervical Cancer Foundation, Inc. (INCCA), are drawn for a different reason. Machu Picchu may be an officially designated “historical sanctuary,” but it nestles in a lush jungle that is no haven for the indigenous women, two-thirds of whom have never had a Pap smear. Peru has one of the highest rates of cervical cancer in the world.

INCAA is dedicated to worldwide prevention of cervical cancer among disadvantaged populations; CerviCusco is its nonprofit, nongovernment partner in Peru. Daron G. Ferris, MD, a professor of family medicine at the Medical College of Georgia at Augusta and a past president of the American Society for Colposcopy and Cervical Pathology (ASCCP), is president of INCAA. General gynecologists, gynecologic oncologists, family physicians, nurses, pathologists, cytotechnologists, and virologists volunteer with INCCA.

In 2005, the group that would found INCAA launched its work in Cusco with 45 medical specialists from five countries who collaborated with specialists from Peru’s national cancer hospital to train 90 nurses in Pap smear techniques. For the first three years, medical personnel drove vans and buses to remote villages to see patients. They still do that, but in 2008, INCCA had built the women’s clinic in Cusco, where Peruvian physicians and nurses now provide a sustained medical presence year-round. More than 15,000 women have received Pap smears through CerviCusco since 2006.

“The missions have been growing every year as we have gotten more volunteer support,” says Barbara A. Winkler, MD, FCAP, a member of the CAP Cytopathology Committee who cochairs the ASCCP committee on pathology. “The first year it was one week, then last year we had two weeks, and this year we have three.”

Members of the Cytopathology Committee—and sometimes their families—have become an important part of the mission. Even the youngest are put to work, entertaining children in the waiting area. Many volunteers bring stuffed animals, coloring books, crayons, and pencils as well. When Dr. Winkler made her first trip to Cusco in 2008, her daughter came and helped with patient registration and data entry. Four members of the CAP Cytopathology Committee will make the trip this year: Amy Clayton, MD, FCAP,

and her daughter, Andrew Fischer, MD, FCAP, Roger Lane, MD, FCAP, and his daughter, and Patricia Wasserman, MD, FCAP.

Dr. Winkler, medical director of pathology for the Mount Kisco Medical Group PD, in Mount Kisco, New York, is now an INCCA board member with responsibility for recruiting and managing pathology and cytotechnology volunteers. Pathologists and cytotechnologists from all across the United States volunteered this summer, she says.

“When we arrive, Dr. Ferris’ group and local clinicians have been collecting the Paps for a couple of weeks; when we get there, we stain them up and start screening as many as we can over the time that we are there,” Dr. Winkler says. “Whatever is left will be brought back to the US, where we will review them. The volunteers split them up; everybody takes some back.”

Women may walk many hours to get to the clinic, often carrying swaddled children. Those screened positive right away and those with clinical symptoms will have a biopsy and/or a minor surgical procedure, if indicated. Those whose slides cannot be screened right away are asked to return in a couple of weeks for results.

“They don’t have screeners when we’re not there,” Dr. Winkler says. “So this year, with the medical school at the university in Cusco, we’re going to try to set up a screening program focused just on cervicovaginal cytology. A lot of the people joining us are cytology educators.”

Dr. Winkler herself is one of those; she is a former associate professor of clinical pathology at the New York University (NYU) School of Medicine and former medical director of the NYU School of Cytotechnology.

“It’s very rewarding,” Dr. Winkler concludes. “You are making an impact because basically this is an unscreened population. It’s not like in the US, where you are looking at the patient’s 40th Pap test. Here, you are the first person who has ever screened that patient. And cervical cancer is a huge cause of mortality in Peru.”

INCCA is supported by donations—To contribute funds or equipment, please see its website (www.theincca.org). To inquire about joining a 2011 volunteer team, please email Dr. Winkler (bwinkler@mkmg.com).