



NEWS RELEASE – FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Indigenous Mayan midwives and health providers visit NHH for knowledge exchange on maternal, newborn and child health

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY, Tuesday, March 28, 2017—The Education Centre at Northumberland Hills Hospital (NHH) was transported to a remote rural landscape in Totonicapán, Guatemala, on Friday, March 24th, as midwives, family doctors, nurses, specialists, students and others gathered to learn and exchange knowledge on maternal, newborn and child health (MNCH).

The unique talk and tour—coordinated by local international development organization [Horizons of Friendship](#) and NHH health-care providers involved with the group, including midwife Taryn Woolsey and family physician Dr. Paul Caldwell—forms part of a combined effort between Horizons and its Guatemalan partner, the Association for Health Promotion, Research, and Education (PIES de Occidente), which is funded in part by Global Affairs Canada. Caldwell, who is also President of the Horizon's Board of Directors, traveled in February to Guatemala with Woolsey and other local health care providers as Canadian delegates.

In the spring of 2016, Horizons signed a multi-million dollar agreement with Global Affairs Canada that will see an ambitious new MNCH initiative in rural Guatemalan communities to reduce maternal, newborn and child health gaps for Indigenous peoples in Totonicapán, a primarily Indigenous Maya K'iche' province with some of the poorest health indicators in the country.

Introduced by Raul Scorza, Community Outreach and Communications Coordinator with Horizons, two Indigenous Mayan midwives, Angela Antonieta Pérez Vicente and Nazaria Ajanel Xiloj, with translation support from Daniel Quesada, Community Outreach Officer with Horizons, described in Spanish the day-to-day challenges of their work in Guatemala and the benefits of Canada's support. In their remote communities, midwives—who are identified at birth for their role according to certain specifications within the Mayan calendar and often follow in the steps of their own mothers and grandmothers—serve many roles with little compensation, including nurse, physician, social worker and dietitian. Using a blanket and a scarf, the NHH visitors demonstrated how they must sometimes carry pregnant women on their back for help, walking many hours, when no other options are available. "Roads and vehicles are simply not options for them," Scorza explained, showing photos of the landscape and the paths they must walk. "Difficult as it is, it is their duty."

Dr. Jorge Ariel Díaz Ordoñez, the medical lead for the community clinic in the region where they work, and a key support for the midwives when pregnancies or childbirth run

in to challenges, spoke to the many issues he faces treating patients in a region of the world where the health system infrastructure and supports we have in abundance in Northumberland are not available. “One oxygen tank alone,” he explained, “may take three months to be filled. As well, we have laboratory limitations and no blood bank.”

The single ultrasound machine operating in Dr. Diaz’s clinic serves more than 140,000 people. Unfortunately, the gel needed to use it is often not available.

Still, in 2016 alone, the clinic he has led for the past seven years saved more than 100 lives, thanks to collaboration with the Indigenous midwives, and the support of Horizons and Global Affairs Canada to provide some of the necessary supplies. Without these interventions, Dr. Diaz explained, in a region where more than 80 per cent of babies are attended in the home, these lives and possibly many more would have been lost.

“In Guatemala, Indigenous women are twice as likely to die during pregnancy or childbirth as non-Indigenous women,” Patricia Rebolledo, Horizons Executive Director explained, and, due to malnutrition, lack of basic vaccinations and other factors, she added, “Indigenous infants are two-thirds more likely to die than non-Indigenous infants. These disparities exist in a nation with significant coverage gaps for its rural, predominantly Indigenous population, making community-based, primary care providers like Indigenous traditional midwives (known as *comadronas*) essential in serving a population that has seen historic and systematic discrimination.”

In addition to their talk and related question and answer period, the group also toured NHH’s Birthing Suites and dedicated surgical suite. Most striking to the Guatemalan contingent was the equipment and supports available and the way in which, at NHH, the midwifery team and the medical staff work in close partnership. “We are a team,” confirmed Dr. Caldwell, “everyone has a role to play. While there are many differences between our Canadian and Guatemalan practices, there are also many similarities – this is, at the end of the day, still a human-to-human service – what the Indigenous midwives provide (comfort, care, assistance) is not all that different from what we provide here, in very different surroundings.”

“We are very grateful for the team’s visit,” said Linda Davis, President and CEO. “Not only was it inspiring to hear the stories, it was an important reminder to us all of just how fortunate we are here in Canada to have the infrastructure and equipment that we have.”

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About Horizons of Friendship – Horizons of Friendship is a Canadian international development organization founded in 1973, based in Cobourg, Ontario, and built on one abiding principle: helping people help themselves. Working directly with grassroots partners, we empower local people to address needs in their communities and to make social and economic change happen on a big scale. Horizons is the only charity in Canada working exclusively in Central America and Mexico, a region of the world with some of the highest levels of inequality. For more information please visit www.horizons.ca.

About Northumberland Hills Hospital – Located approximately 100 kilometres east of Toronto, NHH delivers a broad range of acute, post-acute, outpatient and diagnostic

services. Acute services include emergency and intensive care, medical/surgical care, obstetrical care and palliative care. Post-acute specialty services (PASS) include restorative care and rehabilitation. Mental health care, chemotherapy, dialysis and 16 other ambulatory care clinics are offered on an outpatient basis through partnerships with regional centres and nearby specialists. NHH offers a full range of diagnostic services, including magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), computed tomography (CT) and mammography. The hospital serves the catchment area of west Northumberland County. A mixed urban and rural population of approximately 60,000 residents, west Northumberland comprises the Town of Cobourg, the Municipality of Port Hope and the townships of Hamilton, Cramahe and Alnwick/Haldimand. NHH employs approximately 600 people and relies on the additional support provided by physicians and volunteers. NHH is an active member of the Central East Local Health Integration Network. For more information, please visit www.nhh.ca or follow us on Twitter [@NorHillsHosp](https://twitter.com/NorHillsHosp).

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