

£100 billion (Can\$176 billion) annually, National Health Service doctors will be asked to pen notes that articulate what tasks an ill worker can and cannot perform (www.dwp.gov.uk).

Acquittal: The first person to face a jury trial in Quebec on charges of assisting suicide has been acquitted. Stephan Dufour, 30, was found not guilty of aiding or abetting his disabled uncle, Chantal Maltais, who had polio, to commit suicide. In September 2006, Dufour put rope and a choke chain in his uncle's bedroom. Maltais later used the equipment to kill himself. The defence argued Dufour's limited intellectual capacities

made him unable to resist pressure from his verbally abusive uncle.

MEDNIK: Scientists have discovered a rare disease characterized by mental retardation, enteropathy, deafness, peripheral neuropathy, ichthyosis and keratoderma that afflicts 4 French Canadian families in the eastern Quebec region of Bas-St-Laurent. The syndrome, caused by a mutation in the *APISI* gene (*PLoS Genet* 4[12]: e1000296), was traced to common ancestors who had emigrated from France between 1608 and 1759.

Judicial prejudice: A Barrie, Ontario, judge who demanded that an

HIV-positive witness don a mask before testifying because "the HIV virus will live in a dried state for year after year after year and only needs moisture to reactivate itself," has been found by the Ontario Judicial Council to have behaved "inappropriately" (www.aidslaw.ca). But Justice Jon-Jo Douglas of the Ontario Court of Justice, against whom complaints were laid by the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network and HALCO, the HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic (Ontario), was not censured as he had acknowledged his misconduct and apologized. — David Manly, Ottawa, Ont., and Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

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DISPATCH FROM THE MEDICAL FRONT

Drifting sand, hiking tours and nice tans

On a rainy September afternoon in Vancouver, under the cold fluorescent lights of a lecture theatre, a summer trip to Honduras was an easy commitment to make.

We'd just been given a slide show about building a partnership between our medical school and a Honduran nongovernmental organization to do "sustainable work to improve the health and living conditions of women and children in rural Honduras."

We didn't know exactly what that meant, but it sounded good, and the volunteers in the pictures had big smiles and nice tans.

Four of us — Carina Perel-Panar, Sean McLean, Jeremy Saunier and myself — signed up.

We prepared for almost a year. We wrote grant proposals and scholarship applications. We raised money for our own travel. We worked with faculty to prepare 3 exciting research projects. We even took Spanish classes together on Wednesdays.

Like good medical students, we had all the details covered. We were ready to fly in to Honduras, set up camp and do some good.

On the morning of the second day, a



Honduras is considered one of the poorest countries in the Western hemisphere, with one of the sharpest disparities among socioeconomic groups. According to the World Health Organization, life expectancy for men is 67 years, and for women 73, while per capita income is roughly \$3400.

trailer load of sand we'd purchased for building cement floors was delivered in a ditch by the side of the road. After breakfast, Oscar, our local guide, asked us if we would help him shovel it out of the ditch, 10 feet over.

"Ridiculous," we said. "That would take us all day!"

So we left it where it lay.

That afternoon, a storm rolled in and water began to rise in the ditch, carrying away our precious sand! We scrambled to save most of it, but some — maybe enough for a kitchen floor — was lost.

Knowing how important the project

was, we expected a scolding from Oscar.

Instead, we got a smile, a wave of his hand, and an invitation to go on a hiking tour of his cropland.

And that was how the rest of the trip went. We'd make lame attempts at "aid," mess those up, and wait for the locals to come to the rescue. When it came to their world, regardless of our education, we knew less and they knew more.

There was no way we could solve their diarrhea epidemic, or their contraception problems, or any other systemic issue in their community in 2 weeks. But we could build some bridges, and ask some questions, and maybe lay a couple of cement floors to keep the bugs out.

And that was enough. That and pictures of our big smiles and nice tans to lure next year's group. — Trevor Hartl, Vancouver, BC

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CMAJ invites contributions to "Dispatches from the medical front," in which physicians and other health care providers offer eyewitness glimpses of medical frontiers, whether defined by location or intervention. Submissions, which must run a maximum 400 words, should be forwarded to: wayne.kondro@cmaj.ca