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Author

Kaplove, Chip

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REFLECTIONS

Drama in the Peruvian Andes

Chip Kaplove, MD, FACEP

*Clinical Assistant Professor, UCSF
Attending Physician, San Francisco General
Hospital Emergency Department
San Francisco, California*

This past month I enjoyed a great family vacation in Peru. My wife Judy and our teenagers Rachel and Jake were on a five day trek on the Salcantay Trail, hiking to Macchu Picchu, the famous lost city of the Incas. The Salcantay trail is an alternate to the more well known Inca Trail. It crosses a 15,200 foot pass between two massive glacier covered mountains, Salcantay and Humantay. We crossed the pass and descended into the high jungle. At about 12,000 feet up, we set up our tents near a few local huts and began to relax.

Suddenly there was an urgent cry for a doctor to come quickly. I ran with our guide to a small one room hut. Rabbits and guinea pigs scurried around on the dirt floor. A frightened young mother was cradling her five year old boy. "He's dying," she wailed over and over. A quick glance at him made her proclamation seem frighteningly accurate. "Jose" was unresponsive, taking rapid and shallow breaths with his eyes open but unable to fixate. He was obviously quite febrile. After finally calming mom enough to talk with her, I learned that he had been fine the day before but had awakened with an upset stomach and had five episodes of bloody diarrhea. The whole picture suddenly became much clearer. Jose had developed shigella, which can cause both bloody diarrhea and the release of a neurotoxin that can lead to seizures. His near death look was at least partly the result of his postictal state.

We were in a rather primitive area from a medical standpoint with no electricity or running water or phone available. Fortunately, I had brought some ciprofloxacin with us. Jose was too dazed to cooperate and take the antibiotic that he desperately needed. I crushed up 250mg and used my finger to

get it into his mouth bit by bit. He gradually aroused somewhat from the postictal state but still looked quite ill. When I returned for his second dose of the day he looked a little better and was taking minimal fluids. On each visit I washed my hands with soap and water the best I could. When I gave him another dose the next morning, he looked truly improved. I warned his Mom about the dangers of it spreading to his sister and others in the family, and I gave them the rest of our ciprofloxacin. The mother graciously thanked us as we set off for Macchu Picchu. Since our return I've emailed the trekking company and our guide to try to find out how the young boy did. They have not responded, but I assume he did well. How do I know that? Am I sure of his diagnosis of shigellosis?

When we arrived at Macchu Picchu two days later, I also developed bloody diarrhea. Fortunately, there was a pharmacy right there and I immediately started my own ciprofloxacin and was better in a day or so. While a bit embarrassed to have allowed myself to catch my patient's illness, at least I am confident that the antibiotic worked.

