PMBA course leads to life-saving surgery

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PMBA student Dr. Rizwan Aslam (second from right) poses with the patient he helped perform a life-saving procedure on. Also pictured are medical team members Dr. Ana Gonzalez (left), Dr. Hugo St. Hilaire (third from left) and Dr. Eddie Gharzouzi (kneeling) and members of the patient's family.

When Dr. Rizwan Aslam enrolled in the Freeman School’s PMBA program, he expected to get a peek inside the business world. He didn’t expect to save someone’s life.

As part of the program, Aslam, an associate professor of otolaryngology and neurosurgery at Tulane University School of Medicine, signed up for Healthcare in Central America, a course targeted at students in Tulane's MD/MBA program designed to help them understand the Latin American healthcare system. Students in the course spend a week in Guatemala touring medical facilities and learning the country's healthcare delivery and financing systems. Through Freeman's partnership with Universidad Francisco Marroquin (UFM), a private university in Guatemala City, students also participate in clinical rotations alongside medical students in a rural clinic as well as administrative rotations in insurance company-owned hospitals, state hospitals and other healthcare organizations.

Shortly after returning from Guatemala, Aslam received a phone call from a surgeon he'd met during the trip. One of his patients had a large tumor on the top of her head, but the hospital had no doctors with the training necessary to remove it. The doctor asked Aslam if he could assist in performing the urgent, life-saving surgery.

After determining that bringing the patient to America for the surgery would be too difficult, Aslam and Dr. Hugo St. Hilaire, a New Orleans-based reconstructive surgeon, agreed to travel to Guatemala to perform the surgery.

"The patient needed a very sophisticated reconstruction that nobody in Guatemala could perform," Aslam recalls. "And she had no means to do the surgery otherwise, since she couldn't come to us so we went to her."



Aslam, kneeling, with fellow Freeman MBA students during their class visit to Guatemala.

Aslam and St. Hilaire flew to Guatemala on a Thursday night and spent all day Friday on the complex procedure. The surgery, Aslam says, was successful.

“She is doing very well and still communicates with us,” Aslam says. “It was really an amazing experience.”

Aslam enrolled in the PMBA program to learn business disciplines that could benefit his medical practice, but thanks to his experience in the course, he hopes to continue collaborating with his Guatemalan colleagues to drive change and help underserved populations.

“Our goal is to work together to create a more sustainable model that allows us to provide care more frequently to those who really need it,” says Aslam. “Working through the Freeman School made this collaboration possible, which ultimately led to saving someone’s life.”