

Vaccination Day

The little boy doesn't notice when the needle breaks his skin. He just stares ahead innocently until Juan depresses the plunger on the syringe and injects the boy's right buttock with a quintuple vaccine against diphtheria, whooping cough, a type of influenza, tetanus, and polio. Then the little guy takes a long, horrified breath and starts to scream. He twists around to give Juan a look of shocked betrayal, as if to ask, "What in the heck did I ever do to you?"

We're standing in the Autonomous Zapatista School of *Comandanta* Ramona. It's a one-room schoolhouse with an old blackboard, a dirt floor, and a black-and-white poster of the Zapatista spokesman *Subcomandante* Marcos astride a horse and smoking his famous pipe. Here five mothers have brought 13 small children to get their shots. Juan examines the vaccination record of each child in turn, prepares the appropriate syringes, and fills the room with the high-pitched shrieks of outraged toddlers.

Juan, 36, is a Zapatista health promoter, a local man with a basic medical training that includes vaccinations. Every two months he comes to the clinic in the administrative center of the Zapatista municipality to collect an apprentice health promoter and a 10-quart Coleman lunchbox full of cold packs and vaccines. Then he and the apprentice hitchhike out to a rural community to save small children from sicknesses they haven't heard of and now will never experience.

These vaccinations are now common in this part of Chiapas. Thus, illnesses like diphtheria, tetanus, polio, and whooping cough no longer exist here, according to José Angel Cruz Erape, 38, a veteran of Doctors Without Borders who now works at the municipal Zapatista clinic, where he is affectionately known as *El Doc*. He first worked in Chiapas province, Mexico, in 1987, and he says that the vaccination status of local people has greatly improved since the Zapatista uprising began in 1994.

In addition to the bimonthly campaigns of the Zapatistas themselves, the international attention generated by the uprising brought humanitarian organizations like Doctors Without Borders and the Red Cross to Chiapas. The Mexican government has also offered more social services to poor Chiapans.

But *El Doc* is quick to note that the government has built roads and strung power lines only where it faces the competition of Zapatista organizations that fulfill many of the functions of a state. He says that out in the mountainous country between the provincial capital and the Pacific Coast where there is no Zapatista presence, roads, electricity, and vaccines are still as scarce as they were in the jungle before the uprising began.

El Doc remembers that back then the government would occasionally send nurses – but not doctors – to work for a day or two in some of the more easily

accessible rural villages. He says that because the people in the countryside were poor and indigenous, “for the government they didn’t exist.”

Thus, in the 500 kilometers of countryside between Ocosingo and San Quintin the government operated only four clinics. But even those few clinics were not safe for the indigenous people who went to them.

Antonio, 38 years old and now deacon of the local church, served for 20 years as a rural health promoter and remembers the care given in those clinics. He said that, for patients with bacterial infections, the doctors would commonly sell vitamin injections instead of antibiotics. Although these injections had no therapeutic value against bacteria, they were more expensive than antibiotics.

“It was a trick,” he said.

This practice showed the attitude toward indigenous patients held by young, inexperienced doctors completing a period of mandatory service in the countryside after finishing medical school.

“They treated them like animals,” Antonio said.

He recalls that government doctors sterilized indigenous women, including some of his own relatives, neither asking for their consent beforehand nor informing them afterwards. He says that women sometimes died of complications from these unnecessary procedures. When I asked if the Mexican government ever reprimanded doctors for this, Antonio said simply, “No, it was their strategy.”

The day after *Comandanta* Ramona’s trip to the school, I join two other Zapatista health promoters for the hike to Ibarra, a village separated from the gravel road by a one-and-a-half-hour trek on a footpath of puddles and mud. It’s a place where every shingle, every lumbered board, and every bag of cement mix came in on the back of a person or an animal.

There they meet a half-dozen mothers and twice as many children nervously awaiting their shots. The Zapatistas have trained community health promoters to minister to the basic health needs of their people. Thus, these women no longer need to choose between lacking treatment and enduring the callous racism of the government health system. The Zapatistas have a word for this kind of freedom. They call it autonomy.