

Helping in Mexico

American Practitioners Help Establish Certification

By Kim Fernandez

For the past 10 years, volunteer American prosthetists have visited Queretaro, Mexico, up to four times per year. They helped build a fully-equipped clinic there and spend their time seeing patients, some of whom travel many miles for an appointment with a certified practitioner.

This past November, six Americans traveled to the city to see 39 patients in 10 days. But this trip was very different than past years: in addition to helping poor amputees receive prosthetics and treatment, the practitioners helped administer and observe Mexico's first-ever certification exam for O&P professionals.

The certification process, under the supervision of the newly-established Barra Mexicana para la Certificacion en Ortesis y Protesis, A.C. (BAMCOP), was years in the making. Organizers say it marks a significant step toward providing top-notch orthotic and prosthetic care throughout Mexico.

Until this year, only one Mexican practitioner had received certification credentials, and they were from the American Board of Certification (ABC). In fact, BAMCOP's president anticipates certifying 150 O&P professionals in the next five years. That's quite a step for a country that just 10 years ago, relied on donated equipment and time to treat its amputees.

This, say BAMCOP representatives, is only the beginning.

Queretaro's Clinic

In 1977, Arturo Vazquez Vela became the first—and, to date, only—Mexican practitioner to receive ABC certification in orthotics. He'd spent three and a half years studying in the U.S.

"I was young enough to try anything," he said.

On receiving his certification, he returned to Mexico, where a shortage of O&P professionals left many amputee patients without adequate care.

After practicing around Mexico, Vazquez Vela and his brother, Eduardo, also an O&P practitioner, began treating patients in Queretaro. These were patients with no way to pay for their treatment, and they came out of the woodwork to see qualified professionals.

The brothers, together with other Mexican professionals, founded the Centro para la Rehabilitacion Integral de Minusvalidos del Aparato Locomotor, IAP (CRIMAL), a non-profit clinic that relied on corporate and private donations of equipment, prosthetics, and cash to keep going.

Vazquez Vela had established friendships with several American practitioners while studying in the U.S.; among them was Junior Odom, CP, who ran the Blue Grass Artificial Limb Company in Lexington, KY. Odom had traveled to Mexico City several times a year for seven years when Vazquez Vela established the clinic; he'd begun working with the Flying Doctors of America after a devastating earthquake in Mexico City.

“We had some clinics in Mexico City underway,” Odom recalled, adding that he’d planned to retire from his Mexican volunteer work. But he met with Vazquez Vela and his brother, and their work in Queretaro was irresistible. “We were down there talking about Queretaro, and I decided to keep going to Mexico,” he added.

Odom became involved in every step of the clinic’s birth, from reviewing blueprints to soliciting donations from American companies.

“When we first started in Queretaro, the people had never had any services,” he said. “I remember them coming out of the hills like ants to see us.”

CRIMAL soon began hosting practitioners from the U.S. and Germany up to four times per year, providing lodging for six at any time. Patients set up appointments and the practitioners worked late, sometimes until 2 or 3 a.m., providing prosthetics, therapy, and adjustments. “We see 40 to 50 amputees in four or five days,” said John “Mo” Kenney, CPO, FAAOP, of Kenney Prosthetics, Lexington, KY. Kenney has traveled to CRIMAL annually for six years. “People find their way to the clinic after traveling for hours—sometimes they stay in the parking lot all day.”

CRIMAL grew into a fully-equipped clinic under the leadership of Vazquez Vela, who returned to the U.S. in 2000 to test for ABC certification in prosthetics. “I fell in love with ABC and I had to be certified,” he said. “I was 53 years old. My children said, ‘Papa, you’re crazy!’”

He failed the exam first, then returned to pass it later that year. “You fight for anything valuable in life,” he said. “I wanted to show my children that and I wanted to show the Mexican people that we could do this.”

After receiving his second certification, he returned to Mexico determined that other professionals there should become certified, but that instead of traveling to the U.S., they should establish their own certification procedure.

Mexican Certification

In July 2001, Vazquez Vela and 16 other Mexican prosthetists began collecting technical manuals from American universities with O&P programs. Working with Odom, Kenney, Joel Kempfer, CP, FAAOP, Kempfer Prosthetics Orthotics, Inc, Greenfield, WI, and German professional Andreas Radspieler, Vazquez Vela and his associates established BAMCOP and began working on a certification exam for Mexican practitioners.

“We got printed material from the Internet and prosthetics books, and we translated this material from English and German into Spanish,” Vazquez Vela said. From that, they wrote their own technical manual, which was studied and tested for a year.

From that, the BAMCOP team began writing questions and scenarios based on the manual, and had a variety of doctors and medical professionals review them. The result was a two-part certification exam; candidates would complete a written exam and a practical exam. The team then solicited the help of a local computer expert to put the written test onto computers, so that candidates could complete their work and be graded immediately.

Last September, the exam was finalized and candidates began applying for its first administration, scheduled for November. As luck would have it, both Kenney and Kempfer planned to be in Queretaro at that time, and agreed to put their ABC examination experience to work administering BAMCOP’s first certification exam.

The Exam

Kempfer's first trip to Queretaro had been planned for September 11, 2001, but terrorist attacks on the United States left him and the rest of that year's volunteer delegation stranded in airports. The mission was scrapped, and he began planning a visit for 2002.

"Mo Kenney and I have experience serving as ABC examiners, and Arturo asked us to come down early and help administrate this exam," he said.

So from November 1 – 3, that's exactly what they did.

While the first BAMCOP examination went extremely well, there were a few minor glitches. Many of the 13 candidates had never worked on computers before and needed extra time to become acclimated to the machines. And because Kenney, Kempfer, and German practitioner Radspieler spoke little Spanish, translators were brought in to assist communication efforts.

"We had to allow a little extra time for that, but it went extremely well," Kempfer said, noting that the first four Mexican candidates to be tested were fluent in English, and they later stayed to help translate for other candidates. "That's not an ideal situation," Kempfer said. "I imagine they were second-guessing themselves the whole time. But for the first exam, it went off with hardly a glitch."

Candidates were allowed to take the exam twice because of the language and technology barriers, and 10 passed. Nine candidates sat for and passed the practical exam, and received Mexico's first certification: CP(M), which stands for Certificado en Protesis (Mexico).

Vazquez Vela said the exam was such a success that he anticipates having 150 Mexican practitioners certified in the next five years—a huge

leap in a country that has only two schools teaching O&P curricula.

BAMCOP is currently supported by the Sociedad Mexicana de Ortopedia and is seeking recognition from the Health Ministry and Education Ministry, as well as the National Academy of Medicine. Candidates for the CP(M) designation must have a diploma, degree, or entitlement in orthotics or prosthetics from a recognized educational organization, or 15 years of field experience. These requirements parallel those held by ABC, but no residency requirement was written, as there are currently not enough certified practitioners to supervise candidates.

Vazquez Vela said the certification will help boost the level and availability of care available to Mexican amputees. "Unfortunately, in Latin countries, some other professionals look at the O&P professionals like vendors," he said. "But in this field, we have the value of any other profession. We need to be certified to treat patients and have the knowledge and educational support to do that."

Kempfer agrees. "The people there are just waiting to become certified," he said. "There are two schools cranking out practitioners."

Orthotics Next

Vasquez Vela and BAMCOP have no intention of stopping at prosthetics certification. Orthotics certification is, in fact, already in the works.

"We are in the process of getting all the questions and mechanics for the orthotics exam," Vasquez Vela reported. "We are planning to have it ready by the fall, and we will be administering the first orthotics exam this coming October or November."

The long-term plan, he added, is to hold the prosthetics exam in the spring and the orthotics exam in the fall.

A Better System

Odom, who said he may or may not return to Queretaro again, said that Vazquez Vela deserves all the credit for establishing certification in Mexico.

“Arturo loves ABC,” he said. “He thinks more of certification than anybody I know, and he thought this was very

important. He wanted to make sure the Mexican practitioners who worked on patients knew what they were doing—he wanted to be sure they were trained and qualified to do the work.”

Kim Fernandez is a freelance writer based in Bethesda, Md.