

# Clinica Betañia

by NILE SPRAGUE and GABRIEL RAMOS-ROCCHIO

A BEACON OF HOPE  
IN A CITY SHACKLED  
BY DRUG CARTELS



Opposite page, Maria Guadalupe Valdez, 60, visits the clinic twice weekly for injections of iron to treat anemia. Photo by Nile Sprague.

Type “Reynosa, Mexico” into Google’s search engine and the top three hits are: a Wikipedia entry, a Google maps entry and an *Los Angeles Times* headline that reads, “Reynosa, Mexico: Where the Cartels Rule.”

With press like that, it is no wonder the Methodist Health Center, Clinica Betañia, located just over the border in Reynosa, Mexico, has lost 70 percent of its clients, the majority of whom were U.S. nationals, crossing the border for inexpensive, high quality health care and dentistry.

When I arrived in Reynosa, I stood out like a sore thumb with my blond hair and professional cameras hanging from my neck. I saw a heavy police and military presence and could sense the tension, but this was far from what I’d heard and read. My perception of Reynosa prior to arriving was in direct contrast with what I found during my outing on Sunday. I visited a commercial district in the heart of the city and found families and young couples promenading and shopping, ice cream in hand. At no time during my visit did I feel unsafe or threatened.

“We used to have 50 patients per day, but with the situation right now, everyone is living in insecurity,” explained Isi Gutiérrez Rodríguez, director of Clinica Betañia. “Now we only average 300 patients per month, 10 or 12 patients per day.”

The loss of U.S. patients and subsequent income has put on hold the project to expand the facility into a 24-hour hospital. In fact, the common thread that wove through Ms. Rodríguez’s tour of the clinic was simply that everything was “almost” complete. There was X-ray equipment to provide comprehensive service but no room prepared to house the equipment. There was a general recovery room with three beds but no privacy curtains. There was a private room for patient recuperation and a birthing room, both missing furniture. There was the area for surgeons to wash themselves prior to surgery with no water taps. Finally, there was the area for surgery 80 percent complete, missing only some ceiling work and air conditioning. When asked how much longer it would take to open the five bed hospital if they had

the money, Ms. Rodríguez answered, “Two months.”

Dr. Reynaldo Molina, echoing Ms. Rodríguez, said, “About 70 percent of our dental patients came from the U.S. They don’t come anymore because of the violence, the shootings. We hope the times will change for better, and we welcome all the people from the U.S.”

## Created to serve

Clinica Betañia was founded in 1970. Its original mission was to provide workshops in nursing and medicine as well as English and even music classes. The clinic evolved over the years into a medical facility with two general practitioners, a specialist in surgery, a psychologist, a laboratory and two dentists.

Clinica Betañia also provides free health care clinics at *Senda de Vida*, or Path of Life, a migrant camp located on the banks of the Rio Grande with the United States just on the other side of the river. The migrant camp came into existence to help people deported from the United States. Far from home and in most cases destitute after having spent their life savings trying to enter



Dental care is part of the services offered at Clinica Betañia in Reynosa, Mexico. Right, the clinic also provides free medical services at the nearby migrant camp.

Isi Gutiérrez Rodríguez, director of Clínica Betaña, shows anesthesia equipment for the coming hospital.



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the United States, the migrants are spiritually rehabilitated and given shelter, three meals a day and medical attention.

The day I visited, my host, Willie Berman, a coordinator for United Methodist missionary visits in the area, was bringing supplies and clothing to donate to the camp. “Right now there are 50 to 60 people in this camp, but there are times when we reach 80 to 100,” Mr. Berman said.

One dormitory is for men and the other for women. After staying a couple of days, the migrants are required to go out and work during the day if they are going to continue to stay in the evenings. The standing rule, Mr. Berman explained, is that there is no sleeping on the beds during the day; however, exceptions might be made for women late in their pregnancies.

Clinica Betaña, open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday, welcomes patients from all economic levels.

“Depending on the financial situation, the patient has a choice to make payments over time, or we provide discounts or in some cases the treatment is totally free,” Ms. Rodríguez said. “Right now our dental practice is the busiest service in the clinic and is the area you can best see the different socioeconomic levels.”

Maria Patricia Silva, 40, and her 14-year-old son use the dental facilities at Betaña. “I learned about the clinic from the pastors in my church,” Ms. Silva said. Trinidad Methodist Church is 20 minutes away in the town of Pecera. “Before coming here I had not gone to a dentist in a very long time.”

Ms. Silva earns a living as an assistant accountant at a scrap metal company, which places her at a midlevel economic standing. She has government

health care and is able to go to a government sponsored clinic. “But the quality of service here is excellent,” she said. “I’m a single mother so sometimes it is difficult, but with help I can make it. For example, the discount and opportunity to make payments over time have helped me. I’ve already finished paying for the service.”

Gloria Cano Hernandez is another patient. The 53-year-old mother of four has been raising her children alone since the death of her husband. An unpaid volunteer at the General Hospital of Reynosa, Ms. Hernandez earns her income from rental properties. She’s in transition, arranging documents for U.S. residency, which makes it difficult for her to sign a contract for work and, thus, health benefits.

Ms. Hernandez came to Betaña Clinica in hopes of receiving proper care.

“I went to various clinics for dental care, and in a small amount of time I had problems again,” she said. “Thanks to the work of Dr. Molina I have everything fixed. I give him and God many thanks.”

Maria Guadalupe Valdez, 60, visits the clinic twice weekly in order to receive injections of iron, as she is anemic. She lives with her brother and earns little money from an occasional house cleaning job. She’s happy Betaña is an option. “The price here is very good. With what I’ve got, I can pay,” she said. “It’s different from the other clinics and labs because it’s cheaper, and they attend to me very well.”

Ms. Rodríguez agreed. “In other places, even if they see you sick and crying and in pain, they won’t give you service if you don’t pay,” she said.

In these times, when the news coming out of Reynosa is focused solely, and often sensationalized, on drug cartel mur-

United Methodist missionary Willie Berman, right, and others receive clothing sent by U.S. churches for distribution at the migrant camp in Reynosa, Mexico.



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ders, the clinic has more than ever needed outside financial assistance to provide premium service at a discount for the poor. For a while, Clínica Betaña was self-sufficient. Because of the paying customers from the United States, Clínica Betaña could afford to pay its staff, begin renovations to convert the clinic into a five-bed hospital and fill the need for patients who come for surgery when their hospitals turn them away because they are unable to pay.

“Right now we are in our fourth month of having trouble with liquidity, to pay our obligatory financial commitments,” Ms. Rodríguez said. “Our prayer is that the U.S. people will return and get medical attention here, which will help them financially and help us. We can mutually help each other.”

The soon-to-be hospital has the potential to serve the low-income pop-

ulation who would be turned away from other hospitals, if only enough money can be raised to finish the expansion begun in 2007. A ray of hope came in the form of a grant to Betaña Clinica to buy a backup generator.

“A church in Galveston, Texas, helped us with part of the generator, which costs \$21,000 U.S. dollars. We are going to put together the other part, and we will complete the purchase of the generator,” Ms. Rodríguez said, determination in her tone. “If electricity goes off in the middle of surgery, we will be able to continue.”

With a little bit of help, Clínica Betaña will continue as both a comprehensive medical facility and a beacon of hope. 

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