Asociación Pro Bienestar de la Familia Ecuatoriana (APROFE) is a non-profit private healthcare provider in Ecuador that is working to improve access to care and quality of care, at a price that is affordable for the low- and middle-income population. Patients can seek care at a health center in APROFE’s network for a fee of about $11-$12 per visit. APROFE’s initial focus was on reproductive and sexual health, but they later expanded to provide more diverse primary and specialty services. As of September 2012, APROFE runs 18 health centers, as well as a maternal and surgery clinic and mobile clinics that serve rural areas.

WWW.APROFE.ORG.EC

RECOGNITION

THE STORY

The healthcare system in Ecuador is comprised of a combination of public and private providers. Ecuador’s government established universal health care through the National Health System in 2008; however, the public sector provides healthcare services for only approximately 60% of the population. Because of a lack of providers in rural areas, an estimated 20% of the population (typically the poorest) does not have access to health care.

Chronic shortages of medicine, equipment and trained personnel, as well as overcrowding in state hospitals and long waiting lists for surgeries are major challenges facing the public health care system. Patients who can afford to often seek care with private clinics. However, the public system has made recent strides to expand medical care for the poorest communities, strengthen information technology systems, and improve the capacity of health care suppliers. APROFE maintains a collaborative relationship with the government and, in some locations, provides laboratory services for government centers.

As a private not-for-profit provider, APROFE is focused on continual improvement in customer service and efficient capacity of all doctors and staff in order to remain competitive. They have found that patients will come to APROFE when faced with long wait times for consultations and services through the public health care system.

THE INNOVATION

As the pioneering provider of sexual and reproductive health in Ecuador, APROFE has built a network of 18 centers that also now provide primary care and many other medical specialties. The same standards and quality of care are applied across the network. In addition, APROFE strives to implement the latest technology across all of their centers. Their infrastructure and patient experience rivals the expensive private health clinics but is affordable for low- and middle-income families.

APROFE demonstrates that high quality private health care can be provided at low cost in Ecuador. The tight quality control and continuous training for doctors and other staff are innovative in the Ecuadorian health system.
APROFE also innovates in community health. They recently launched a Department of Social and Community Development that provides health care via a medical brigade team in rural areas, largely unreached by the national health system, and a women’s prison. This program takes a holistic approach by exploring connections between health, art, employment, tourism, and municipal government. They are also forming development teams consisting of a psychologist, dancing instructor, and youth health educator who stay several days in a rural community as well as an art brigade that commits to a ten-day residency in the community. Past art brigades have included a documentarian, an architect, and an artist who worked with women in the community to identify solutions to local issues that can impact health.

Founded in 1965 with $9,000, APROFE now operates a network of 18 centers, a maternal and surgery clinic, and mobile clinics in rural areas. APROFE has 1.5 million patient visits each year and employs 800 people. They are headquartered in Guayaquil with a national presence around Ecuador.

APROFE’s primary value is providing access to high quality care in a private and comfortable environment at low cost that is accessible to low- and middle-income people. There is no comparable alternative for this population and, without APROFE, many would go without health care.

APROFE was originally founded to meet a need for family planning services and detection of cervical cancer and then expanded into wider services in sexual and reproductive health. Over time, APROFE expanded services to 13 cities. APROFE has also always provided family planning services in rural areas where no medical access was available.

Demand from patients as well as the need to become self-sustaining as an organization (rather than relying on donor funds) led to diversification of services starting in 1988. APROFE diversified in areas that complemented the existing medical services, such as adding laboratories for clinical analysis and cytopathology, ultrasound technology, maternity and surgical clinics, and other services like colposcopy, pediatrics, and general medicine. To support the expansion of services, APROFE upgraded the organization’s infrastructure and technology.

THE MODEL

APROFE is able to spread operating costs across the network of 18 centers. Not all of the centers are self-sufficient and the higher-performing centers help to subsidize those that do not bring in as much revenue. The infrastructure is managed at the headquarters in Guayaquil.

Services and processes are standardized across the 18 centers in 13 cities and strict quality control protocols are followed across the network. A team consisting of APROFE’s Director of Information together with a doctor and a psychologist review health records to make sure that treatment is appropriate and follows APROFE’s standardized procedure and norms.
APROFE operates their own labs to exercise more control and cost savings over laboratory testing. They are also considering opening a pharmacy in order to help patients save more money.

APROFE considers human capital to be one of the primary pillars of its sustainability and invests heavily in training and resources for employees, including support for doctors to attend international conferences. New employees receive about a month of initial training. APROFE provides performance incentives for center administrators and recognition for their 'best employees.' Believing that stronger patient-doctor relationships will result in better care and more satisfaction for the providers, APROFE provides each doctor an office personalized with his or her name on the door and patients are encouraged to develop long-term relationships with their provider. Although APROFE does not offer salaries competitive with other private health care systems, many employees are committed to the mission of APROFE and have been with the organization for more than 35 years.

Because of its reputation, APROFE typically has more applicants than open positions. The organization relies on recommendations from others to fill positions and promotes internally whenever possible.

APROFE expands their customer base largely through patient referrals and finds that their quality of service and patient satisfaction leads to a multiplying effect among family members and close friends. APROFE regularly implements new ideas to improve patient service and infrastructure so that patients will feel the services are constantly expanding and renewing. Patient flow analysis is conducted constantly to reduce waiting times.

APROFE targets small cities that are developing and growing and avoids underdeveloped or stagnating areas. They conduct extensive analyses to better understand how cities are changing before deciding to establish a center.

Through patient fees and other revenue sources, APROFE meets all operating costs and any additional revenue is reinvested into the organization to build capacity and expand services. APROFE keeps operating costs low overall by reducing administrative costs and generating high volume of patient visits.

APROFE’s genesis and early growth was supported by foreign donors (largely USAID) but when that funding stream ended, the organization moved to develop new and sustainable sources of revenue by diversifying services and locations. They shifted their focus from the very poor to the low- and middle-income people who cannot afford typical private healthcare but can pay APROFE’s fees, allowing patients to choose their own doctor and experience a higher level of care.
APROFE also provides laboratory services to the government for a fee and receives some capital gain income on landholdings originally purchased with the intent to build a center in areas where the organization later decided to rent space instead.

“I am focused on the social side of health. Technology improves our ability to diagnose and discover cures but when you lose the human side, medicine becomes like a commodity. There has been a symbiotic relationship between being sick and making a business out of medicine. But we can make a business out of medicine in other ways, by helping people to thrive. We have to start proposing new alternatives and approaches to health care, to become innovative. What APROFE is trying to do is empower patients to take charge of their own health to achieve wellbeing. Medicine is about relationships between people.”
–Larissa Marangoni, Vice Director