

Is There a Junior Doctor in the House?

A hands-on medical teaching tour helps children spread the word about keeping healthy.



THE CHILDREN'S STARCHED WHITE LAB coats rustle as they comb every inch of the model house. They are *mini-médicos en acción*—little doctors in action—and they're searching for “assassin bugs,” the insects that transmit the parasite that causes Chagas disease.

This infectious illness, a killer andcripler in their homeland of Argentina and throughout Latin America, is just one of the health problems the 7- to 11-year-olds are learning to solve at an interactive exhibit called *Mini-Médicos en Acción*, which opened in May 2005 at the Museum of Natural History in Buenos Aires. Based on a science-education program created by the Lawrence Hall of Science in Berkeley, California, *Mini-Médicos* was adapted for Argentine children by HHMI international research scholar Mariano Jorge Levin, in collaboration with the Berkeley science museum and support from HHMI.

Levin was able to leverage HHMI's grant into additional funding from several public and private sources: CONICET, which is the Argentine government's main funding agency for science and technology education; the Fundación Mundo Sano, a healthcare foundation; the Argentine Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology; and Unisol Salud, a nonprofit physicians' organization that runs public health clinics.

Other Argentine international research scholars are helping to bring *Mini-Médicos* to other cities throughout the country, including Córdoba, Mendoza, Rosario, Santa Fe, and Usuahia. This hands-on exhibit is the second Latin American adaptation of the California program—HHMI international research scholar Rafael Radi first adapted it to Uruguay in 2003. HHMI international research scholar Susana López is developing a third version for Mexican children.

The Argentine exhibit is set in a “clinic,” where children move through 11 stations in succession to learn about fever, skin diseases, nutrition, and other health matters. Some of the teachers there are medical and graduate students enlisted by Levin and his research-scholar compatriots. But other “teachers” are puppets, created as engaging learning tools by Susana Palomas, executive producer of *Mini-Médicos*. They enable children to hunt through the hair of wigs on mannequins' heads, seeking head-lice puppets hidden within, or to search for assassin-bug puppets in the model house's cracks and crannies that correspond to where real disease-carrying insects might lurk in real homes.

At each station, the children confront a different health issue. “These are not mysteries,” says Levin, whose own research at CONICET, in Buenos Aires, focuses on the molecular genetics of Chagas disease. “These are problems that can be solved with knowledge of hygiene and nutrition and by timely treatment from health professionals.”

“The lesson we want them to learn is that there is no mystery to keeping yourself healthy,” says Levin. ■

—Jennifer Boeth Donovan—

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MARIANO JORGE LEVIN



STAYING HEALTHY IS SERIOUS

To help reinforce and leverage the impact of the exhibit, Levin wrote a song for the children to share with their friends and families:

*Mantenerse sano es algo serio,
Pero conseguirlo no es ningún misterio*
(Staying healthy is serious,
But it's nothing mysterious.)

*Lavarse las manos antes de almorzar,
Después de ir al baño, después de jugar.
Llegada la noche es bueno dormir,
Y al día siguiente jugar y reír*
(Wash your hands before eating,
After going to the bathroom, and after playing.
When night arrives, it's good to sleep,
And the following day, to play and laugh.)