



Date: 28 December 2021

To: Volunteers, Interns, Staff and Partners of Health Bridges International, Inc.

From: Dr. Robert Gehringer, Medical Director, Health Bridges International, Inc.

Re: Coronavirus Pandemic and COVID-19 in Perú

Perú has identified the first cases of the Omicron variant as it strives to increase vaccination. Having experienced severe surges of the Alpha and then Delta viruses, current COVID prevalence in Perú is relatively low, much lower than in the U.S., and vaccine coverage has now surpassed the U.S. with 64% of Peruvians fully vaccinated and 8% boosted. However, Perú holds the unhappy distinction of having had more COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 people than any other country in the world, three times the mortality in the U.S. Though they early on instituted fairly draconian mitigation requirements through curfews, masking mandates, border closures, quarantines, strict lockdowns, and modest stipends to poor families, it simply didn't work well for many reasons.

Initially, Perú couldn't compete with rich countries to obtain scarce resources such as personal protective equipment, tests, masks, ventilators, and other medical supplies, and their weak health system crumbled in the face of thousands of dying and severely ill patients. People were trying to help family members survive by purchasing oxygen tanks on the black market, and in Iquitos, a city of over 400,000, they completely ran out of oxygen when COVID peaked. Health care workers were infected, also resulting in many deaths, and many more have become discouraged and now left the system. With the majority of workers earning weekly or daily wages in the informal economy with little or no economic cushion, the millions of Peruvians living in poverty didn't have the luxury of truly locking down or working from home.

Economic growth took a severe hit in 2020 and 2021 and is slowly coming back. Masking mandates remain even outside on the streets; and in many cities, there are still limitations on the number of customers in restaurants and retail stores, dependent on changing local COVID prevalence. Though transportation has opened up, proof of vaccination is required for air travel or on interstate buses and also just to enter a church or any indoor space where there's economic activity. As in most of the world, Peruvians have been numbed and exhausted by COVID and the difficult restrictions aimed at mitigation, and it's unlikely that severe lockdowns can again be instituted.

All businesses with ten or more employees have now been required to have all employees vaccinated, with HBI among them. Thankfully, we're almost there even before any mandate. With less vaccination refusal and hesitancy than in the U.S., the rates continue to climb with the hope that vaccination (along with some degree of acquired immunity through previous infection from the population's dreadful experience) will lead to much better protection from the next COVID wave. A qualifying note is that Perú initially had only the less effective SinoPharm and Astra-Zeneca vaccines available for about 40% of vaccinees. Now they're able to use almost exclusively Pfizer, with anticipated greater efficacy. We'll see what Omicron brings in 2022, along with the next Greek letter mutant. Happy New Year from your favorite virus.

We're enhancing our online presence to continue training activities, specifically through live presentations and a new online course in newborn resuscitation, plus communication with our various partners as we refocus HBI's mission and priorities. The best source of updated and current information and recommendations can be found on the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website, www.cdc.gov.

Please contact our team with any questions or concerns – info@hbint.org

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert Gehringer".

Robert Gehringer, MD
Medical Director, Health Bridges International, Inc.