Thumbs were not supposed to look that way. That was Owen Kendall’s first thought when he spotted the green wrapping around the thumb of an elementary school student in Obraje. The first-year BU School of Medicine student led the boy from the dim cinderblock classroom into the Andean sunlight of rural Ecuador.

Kendall (MED’14) squatted down and peeled a leaf from the boy’s thumb, revealing a swollen, mud-encrusted gash. He grabbed some wet towels and dabbed at the wound, asking the impassive boy in halting Spanish how and when he got hurt. Seconds later, Kendall was on his cell phone calling for assistance. Within half an hour, a driver arrived from the Cacha Medical Spanish Institute (Cachamsi), a nonprofit international medicine program less than 10 miles away in Riobamba, through which Kendall and five other BU first-year medical students were volunteering last summer. The driver questioned the boy in Quichua, the local language, then whisked him away to the nearest clinic.

For the past two days, as part of their monthlong health education camps for children in the indigenous Cacha region, an autonomous union of 23 Quichua communities, Kendall’s group had been talking to children about the best way to care for nasty cuts. Apparently the lesson hadn’t sunk in. The Quichua remedy—cover with mud or cow liver and wrap with a leaf—clearly trumped the Americans’ advice.

“I just hope that some of the stuff that we teach sticks,” Kendall said. “I think we’re doing a good job, but we just need to keep trying.” The students in the Cachamsi group worked primarily as camp counselors, but they also took medical Spanish classes, shadowed doctors at hospitals and clinics, and lived with families. For some, the trip was an adventurous way to learn Spanish (a useful skill at Boston Medical Center, where it is the first language of many patients). For others, it was a trial run at a career in global health.

They were the third wave of Boston University medical students to conduct health camps through Cachamsi, a program that Suzanne Sarfaty, MED assistant dean for academic affairs and director of international health programs, discovered and hopes will continue.
Also problematic. Unfiltered and unchlorinated, it infects many people—especially children—with intestinal parasites.

At the program’s end, the students agreed that their journey took them to another world, one in which hospitals and clinics have few anesthetics, antibiotics, and painkillers, let alone medical staff. Adriane Levin (MED’14) witnessed skin grafts. Caroline Mullin (MED’14) took medical histories for a pediatrician. And Stephanie Feldman (MED’14) assisted on a laparoscopic surgery to remove a gall-bladder.

Some of the things they learned were heartening, and some were not. On one home visit, Peters Otlans (MED’14) saw a Quichua woman who had spread liver on a weeks-old gash and was in severe pain from the infected wound. After cleaning the wound, the doctor Otlans was shadowing told the woman to go to Riobamba for treatment.

“It’s eye-opening to see the way people are out here,” Otlans said. “Until you actually see it, it doesn’t have the same impact. The woman still refused to go.”

WEB EXTRA Watch a video of BU medical students learning about global health by working in clinics and hospitals in Ecuador at bu.edu/bostonia.

They came from UCLA, Texas, and Toronto. They wore capes and carried wands, cleats, and cameras to the fifth annual Quidditch World Cup, held last November on Randall’s Island, N.Y.

Since its creation at Middlebury College in 2005, quidditch has enjoyed a growth spurt that is appropriately supernatural. In 2007, two colleges played in the first World Cup. In 2008, 12 participated. In 2009, there were 20. In 2010, 45. And on the windy weekend of November 12 and 13, 2011, 96 teams—traveling from as far as Finland—competed in the 2011 Quidditch World Cup.

The BU team, founded in 2008, came to the New York tournament as the 2011 Northeast Regional champion and with a number 12 World Cup ranking. When it was over, the team had come within two games of winning it all, but instead fell to the then and future world champion team from Middlebury. The players drove back to Boston on Sunday night unfulfilled, but with no doubt that the seven-year-old sport of quidditch is here to stay—and that it is much more than a sport.

“Our generation grew up with the Harry Potter characters and we don’t want to let go of that,” says Kedzie Teller (COM’12), one of five captains of the BU team. “As adults, we start to separate the real from the fictional, but no one wants to let go of their childhood.”

Roughly 10,000 quidditch fans descended on Randall’s Island, just across the East River from Manhattan’s Upper East Side, where games were scheduled on nine grass fields.

Katie Stack (CAS’11), who cofounded BU’s team in her freshman year and is now a member of the International Quidditch Association board, flew in from Spain, where she teaches. For Stack, the tournament offered an opportunity to catch up with her three siblings—Caroline (CAS’12), Brendan (CAS’14), and Ian (CGS’13)—all on the team, and her parents, who came down from Boston.

The BU team, officially a club, has begun the process of transitioning to club sport, which would make funding available for coaches and other benefits. In the spring, they will play in the Northeast Regional tournament, which they hope to host at Nickerson Field.

“People laugh,” says Teller. “But they should come to a game to watch us play. It’s not just a sport; it’s a continuation of the movie and the books for thousands of people.”

WEB EXTRA Watch the BU quidditch team compete in the fifth annual Quidditch World Cup at bu.edu/bostonia.