

Hold the soup!

Kevin Pottie

Flies circle the operating table like noodles in a bowl of chicken soup, and the electricity is as erratic as my Spanish verb conjugations. I mention the verbs hesitantly, but honestly, since I find myself in the role of translator. I am part of a volunteer surgical team in a rural part of the Dominican Republic, on what is affectionately referred to as a working holiday. My job is to translate, sponge and wipe. Translate as best I can, sponge away blood from the operating site, and wipe away sweat from the surgeon's forehead.

"Cálmese!" I say. Calm down. I say this key phrase both to the patients and, quietly, to myself, as I adapt to this exotic operating room environment. Fortunately, the postop instructions turn out to be wonderfully repetitive: wash with soap and water twice a day. By the 38th patient I am practically flaunting my fluent Spanish. "Lave con sopa y agua dos veces por día." Patients smile, some even giggle. Apparently they are amused by my English accent.

All seems to be going well until Ana Maria (not her real name) steps into the consultation room. Ana Maria is not satisfied with my postoperative instructions, and she is now standing, hands on hips, relentlessly asking me to repeat my instructions, over and over again. It is getting hot in our little room. Soon, I am on my feet. "SI SEÑORA, CON SOPA Y AGUA, SOPA Y AGUA."



Romi Caron

My voice starts to fade as I realize that I am telling this woman, as I have told the 38 patients before her, to wash her wound with soup, not soap. My face turns from red to pink as I picture Ana Maria wiping chicken-noodle soup over her fresh incision twice a day. At this moment of truth, I get to practise another translation: I'm sorry; I've made a mistake.

I only hope the others take their soup warm, with plenty of salt.

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