Interning at Bellevue Hospital's reproductive choice (RC) service gave me hands on experience with reproductive justice issues. It brought topics to life that I've only learned about in class and heard about through speakers. The RC department deals specifically with the medical procedure of abortion, performing them at both first and second trimester. I've taken away so much from the seemingly short period of time I spent there.

One of the biggest projects I've worked on this summer has been a research study about adolescent girls and the morning after pill, otherwise known as emergency contraception (EC). Currently in New York, EC is available over the counter to individuals over the age of eighteen but requires those underage to have a prescription. The reasoning behind this age discrepancy has been attributed to minor's inability to comprehend the directions well enough to take it without supervision. Our research study aimed to see if adolescent women did or did not understand the directions for EC. Since the New York public school system didn't allow the distribution of our study through the school, we conducted the study by going into the city and finding groups of teenage girls aged twelve to seventeen. Our study consisted of giving them the directions for EC, having them read it over and then answering questions on an anonymous survey.

We needed to collect 1,076 surveys in order for our data to be considered statistically significant. We ended up exceeding that number! We entered the data into a spreadsheet form, coded it numerically and calculated statistics. The research paper itself is currently under construction. When finished, it will be submitted to a medical journal and probably published.

I enjoyed this project more than I had originally expected to. It brought me to a lot of places all over New York City which I probably wouldn't have gone to or seen otherwise. It also allowed me to speak with adolescent girls from all different areas and backgrounds. It was really amazing to be the
person who these girls confided in with about highly personal matters relating to sex, contraception and growing up. Girls in that age group are in need of some sort of informed, non-peer or family figure to confide in and talk to about things that under normal circumstances they feel to be taboo. It felt really great to inadvertently fill that niche. One of my fondest memories of the study was when the other intern and I went to Union Square in search of hoards of underage girls willing to take our survey. From afar we spotted what appeared to be a group of adolescents holding a sign that said “free hugs”. As we approached, about to ask them if they'd be interested in taking a survey, one of the girls holding the sign pointed at me and yelled happily “birth control lady!” as if that were my name. I realized it was a girl that I had given the survey to previously and had spoken with for a really long time about birth control. It made me feel like I had maybe made somewhat of a positive impact on her life choices. I enjoyed the time spent with the young women I interacted with, as well as working on research that has implication for change.

As much as I thoroughly enjoyed working on the study, I struggled with the project at first. Not that I'm particularly introverted, but I don't generally approach random people and ask them to do things for me. But by doing exactly that, it lead me to one of the most important abilities I've developed through the internship: being able to ask. This is not limited to teenage girls and surveys, but includes such things as asking for help and favors. Living in the city, working in the clinic and conquering prior hesitations, helped me develop an attitude of confidence in my ability to do anything. After work one day I went back to my apartment, only to find one of the rooms infested with bugs! Prior, I would have been unable to deal with such a situation. But I solved the problem in a calm manner. I rationalized that after what I had done all day in clinic and out in the streets of New York with teenage girls, that I could overcome my mild bug phobia. Those are some important skills and abilities I've developed as a result of this internship.

There were more projects I worked on as well. I helped develop the binder that's given to the residents working with Dr. Cremer in the reproductive choice service. The binder is essentially the
textbook for the eight weeks on the reproductive choice rotation. I gathered articles, typed up the table of contents, cover letter and reading schedule. Topics covered a wide range of issues on everything from reasons why women choose to have abortions to types of contraception. I assisted with the assembly of the physical binders as well. The binders have since been distributed.

I've also had the amazing experience of traveling and helping with a Basic Health El Salvador delegation. The organization's goal is to eradicate cervical cancer in Latin American countries, which is the leading cause of death among women living in that region. On this delegation we set up clinic in three places: Jucaran, San Vicente and Aractao. This was a follow up delegation for all the patients that had previously been diagnosed with cervical cancer using visual inspection with acetic acid (VIAA) and treated with cryotherapy. In clinic I assisted by making sure the room was prepared with the necessary equipment, handing said equipment to the doctor and my favorite part, taking the biopsies out of the biopsy curettes and putting them in formalin jars. I helped with biopsy management, database entering and paperwork. In addition to the research about the efficiency of VIAA post cryo, an IUD insertion training was done by an American OB/GYN with El Salvadorian practitioners.

Participating in the delegation was a really amazing experience to say the least - definitely one of the highlights of my summer. It allowed me to look at women's health and reproductive justice issues on a global and international level, which is a perspective I had not considered previously.

I can't honestly say that my academic experience adequately prepared me for an internship like this. Sure, I've learned about reproductive choice, abortion and women's health. But skills that can't be learned from books and classes, such as social skills, were much more necessary and utilized most often. Being able to interact with people in a professional, personable, friendly manner without being patronizing was needed. Other skills, such as organization, were important to have as well. Organization mostly came into use before embarking upon a new project; envisioning what would be needed, having a backup plan and creating self-imposed deadlines. Motivation was also needed to reach the created goals, especially since results weren't always tangible or immediate.
Before I began my internship, I assumed that I'd be stuck with paperwork and boring projects that no one else wanted to do. I thought that maybe I would observe an abortion once, perhaps twice if I was lucky and then I'd be in a cubicle the rest of the time running to get people's coffee. I knew such was not going to be the case when I sat down with Dr. Cremer and she asked me what I wanted to get out my internship experience. As opposed to what interns generally do, she made my experience about learning, specifically about what I wanted to learn - what I found fascinating and drawn to. I don't think I could have done anything differently to make my internship experience more meaningful. Everything far surpassed my expectations. I acquired more than just research and clinical experience, I came away with life lessons as well as new friends and mentors.

The RC service as an organization, needless to say was really great. They do important work by providing abortions, contraception and other services to the public regardless of their financial state. I was able to help out in the RC clinic by taking patient histories, helping with the ultrasound and floating products of conception. I even got to do a few pap smears as well as gonorrhea/chlamydia tests. The experience of working in the clinic was amazing, getting to know the patients and hearing their stories was my favorite part. I found the patient interactions to be very fulfilling and gratifying. I was able to support them through their abortions by offering a hand to hold or listening to them before they went under anesthesia. I watched abortions being performed, something that individuals regardless of their stance on the matter never see. Sometimes the political battle over abortions seemed very distant, but a lot of the time it was very evident and manifested itself through the patient demographics and the medical procedure itself (partial birth abortion ban). In this internship I was able to see how diverse the field of reproductive justice is. There is a lot of activism through many different forms such as art and education, as well as the clinical aspect which I was involved with. And as different as they may be, all those forms are necessary.

Prior to my internship experience I was contemplating a possible medical path in the reproductive justice field and envisioned myself working in an environment resembling what
Bellevue's RC clinic embodied. As my internship progressed, it cemented the idea that I was indeed on the right path. At the same time, it opened up the idea of international women's health to me. I loved the work I did in my internship. I was excited to go to into “work” everyday, I always learned something new and generally walked around with a grin.

My suggestion for future interns, although cliché: be yourself. While at first it may be intimidating because you're surrounded by doctors, surgeons, white coats and people that you have a lot of respect for, don't be scared. Loosen up a little bit, laugh and share stories. I'd also say, if you put a lot into this internship you'll get a lot out of it. Talk to everyone: medical students, residents, doctors, patients, security guards, the vendor selling nuts and candy in the lobby, nurses, the lady that rings you up for lunch everyday and listen to their experiences and learn something from everyone. Smile with them and treat them with the same respect you'd like to receive.

Overall, my knowledge about reproductive justice in the US and across the globe has vastly expanded. I feel very grateful that I've had the experience of working with and meeting so many inspiring people, and the support of my supervisor throughout the summer. And of course, thanks to CLPP/RRASC for making this opportunity available to me.