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53201-0413. *Hyperplane arrangements in negatively curved manifolds and relative hyperbolicity.*

Let  $M$  be a finite volume manifold with pinched negative curvature, and let  $S$  be a codimension–2 totally geodesic immersed submanifold. We show that, in certain cases, the fundamental group of  $M - S$  is relatively hyperbolic. Our main technique is to examine the geometry of the universal branched cover of  $M$  with branch locus  $S$ . This branched cover is a CAT( $-1$ ) space  $Y$  on which the fundamental group of  $M - S$  acts. However  $Y$  is not locally compact, and the action is not proper. Nevertheless, an examination of its geometry reveals the structure of relative hyperbolicity. (Received September 23, 2010)