



Beyond Borders



Factors to Consider When Planning Short-Term Global Health Work

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Global health and the global community are more interconnected, and health disparities are more glaring than ever before (Langowski & Iltis, 2011). However, the desire and the commitment to improve health in resource-poor settings are also growing (Kim, Farmer, & Porter, 2013). The United Nations' 2015 Millennium Development Goals numbers 4 and 5 have called for significant reduction in maternal and neonatal mortality (Lawson & Kierse, 2013; United Nations, 2015), and nurses are volunteering to play a part

in improving outcomes. Some aspire to a career in global health but need initial experience; others plan to do just a short one-time stint. Nurses considering short-term involvement can still make significant and positive contributions, but careful planning and preparation are important to avoid potential problems.

Preparing for Volunteer Experiences

Before searching for a potential project or program, it is wise to first spend time learning about

Abstract Volunteer opportunities in short-term global health work can be rewarding experiences, but careful planning and preparation are vital. Potential problems to avoid include ineffective, harmful care; cultural ego-centrism; and lack of sustainability and cost effectiveness. Short-term global health work is most effective when the focus is on ongoing sustainable projects that include a long-term commitment and partnership with host communities. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.nwh.2016.01.003>

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global health and its relationship to poverty, along with critical issues in aid, sustainable development, and relief work, and to cultivate an

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understanding of the social and historical forces that perpetuate health disparities (O'Neil, 2006).

Consider your passion and interests, and identify what it is that draws you to consider a certain type of volunteer work. You might identify personal connections to a location, people, group, or the work itself. Consider what might be the best way to make an impact. What are the priority issues that require a long-term impact? Are they congruent with your interests? For instance, supporting community access to clean water can often do more for parasite eradication than dispensing medication to individuals. Are there local projects on the ground that can benefit more from your physical assistance or by your support from afar? Can you better support the priority needs financially and in other ways, such as by public education and fund-raising

in your own community (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009)? For example, some volunteer opportunities in global health are completely online via the United Nations at onlinevolunteering.org.

Physical fitness and stamina are critical in low-resource settings with extreme temperatures and humidity, rough terrain, limited access to clean water, long work hours, poor sleeping conditions, and sometimes limited local food supply. Jobe (2011) described the difficulty created when thousands of well-meaning but unprepared, uncoordinated volunteers descended upon Haiti after an earthquake, some requiring durable medical equipment and oxygen themselves, clearly unfit for work in that setting. Flexibility and the ability to adapt to unpredictable conditions can be extremely important. Seemingly small things such as the ability to entertain oneself in free time can become difficult for some. Internet and phone connections may be unreliable or nonexistent where the need is greatest. Accommodating special dietary needs and preferences may be unrealistic.

Selecting a Project

A brief Internet search will uncover many possible projects needing volunteers (see Box 1). More than 10 years ago in the United States alone there were more than 1,000 organizations related to global health (Osborn & Ohmans, 2005). A quick Google search for "global health organizations in the US" in August 2015 listed

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