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A Physician's perspective on volunteering overseas... It's not all about sharing the latest technology

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ABSTRACT

There are many therapists and physicians with an interest in doing medical humanitarian work in underserved countries. However, one must be cognizant of numerous factors that can have an impact on the value of the encounter for both the volunteer, local medical community, and patient. With proper planning and a healthy mindset, volunteer work can be an extremely rewarding experience.

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Introduction

As physicians and therapists, there often comes a time in our career when we are intrigued by the possibility of participating in humanitarian work in underserved countries. However, the desire to serve is often tempered by some ambivalence about whether our skill sets are applicable in less technologically advanced health care settings. Furthermore, there may be some concern about the cultural and logistical challenges one might face while working overseas.

A volunteer may also be worried that, despite their best intentions, the medical personnel in the host country will not take advantage of our knowledge and their patients will not achieve the best results. If one has had such experiences in the past it is easy to become discouraged. As a consequence, a well-intentioned volunteer may decide not to volunteer again, resulting in a lost opportunity to participate in what can be an extremely rewarding experience.

I will be discussing a number of key factors that can strongly influence the quality of one's experience as a medical volunteer, including: matching your values and goals with the proper organization; understanding the needs of the population you are trying to

serve; and having a personality that is compatible with being an effective humanitarian.

In this article I will explore some of the major pitfalls and misconceptions related to volunteering overseas from the eyes of a physician who specializes in the hand. This information is intended to help therapists and physicians have a more enriching experience when pursuing humanitarian work in underserved countries. My comments will primarily be a reflection of my personal experience over the last 19 years as a member of Health Volunteers Overseas (www.hvousa.org) participating on multiple occasions in Vietnam, Moldova, Peru, Nepal, Malawi, Bhutan and China. My perspective is also influenced by a 28-year career as a physician in private practice. In addition, I am relying on comments from three Hand Therapists.

There are many well-established organizations, such as Doctors Without Borders (www.doctorswithoutborders.org), that provide an extraordinary service in underserved countries during natural disasters and/or in the face of political upheaval. Others, such as Operation Smile (www.secure.operationssmile.org), fill a void when there is a large backlog of patients with a particular condition but the host location has insufficient funds, facilities and personnel to administer care to the patients. However, for those of us that specialize in the hand, the most frequent overseas humanitarian opportunities often involve serving in countries with a relatively stable government where there is a need for outside assistance in

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order to elevate the level of ongoing care to the general population. In this article, I will be focusing my attention on the latter set of circumstances.

Attributes of an effective humanitarian

Volunteering overseas allows a hand specialist the opportunity to simultaneously step into the role of caregiver, educator, colleague, and international liaison. Such trips can be an invaluable learning experience for both the volunteer and those with whom he or she comes in contact. However, when considering whether to pursue humanitarian work, it is important to approach the opportunity with the appropriate mindset in order to increase the likelihood of having a positive experience. Some of the most valuable attributes of a successful volunteer include humility, compassion, patience, and flexibility. Egos have no place in humanitarian work. You must be willing to come with an open mind, look at a situation from multiple viewpoints and adopt therapeutic strategies that accommodate and respect local conditions, cultures, traditional techniques, politics, resources, educational backgrounds, demographics, and social norms. In deciding to volunteer overseas, you should also consider whether you are prepared to teach and operate under sometimes challenging conditions and often with limited resources.¹

As stated previously, a crucial element to being a successful volunteer involves having a clear understanding of our role as volunteers. More often than not, physicians that specialize in the hand assume the main purpose for volunteering is to perform and possibly teach new surgical techniques to orthopedists. This stems, in part, from the conventional practice of referring to ourselves as “hand surgeons.” The use of this terminology perpetuates a misleading perception of our role in the health care system. In fact, by introducing ourselves to others as “hand surgeons,” we subconsciously convey and reinforce the misconception that our primary role is that of a surgeon rather than a physician.

In my opinion, it is healthier to view ourselves as individuals who are skilled in the diagnosis and treatment, often non-surgical, of medical conditions related to the hand and upper extremity. Emphasizing the benefits of an integrated team approach between physicians and therapists can further reinforce this mindset. Equally important is placing an emphasis on the role of physicians and therapists to educate our patients concerning factors that may have contributed to the onset of their condition along with preventive measures that may lessen their symptoms and reduce the likelihood of needing surgical intervention. Providing this information to patients is even more pertinent in underserved countries where resources are already stretched to the limit and non-surgical approaches, in many settings, may be the most prudent and/or only realistic option. In such environments, creative, even if less than ideal, approaches are needed to best serve the population. Therefore, underserved countries offer a golden opportunity to demonstrate the “art” of medicine to attending physicians, residents, medical assistants, therapists, nurses, and students. Focusing on these crucial elements may also initiate a slight shift in our own mindset, leading us away from being too aggressive surgically, thereby improving the management of patients in our own practice.

Based on my experience, more often than not, the greatest contribution we can make as physicians and therapists has very little to do with teaching advanced surgical procedures or fabricating custom orthoses. Oftentimes, a more valuable contribution involves focusing on more fundamental issues that affect a broad segment of the patient population and which can be effectively addressed by dedicating a modest amount of manpower and facility resources to the topic at hand. As an example, in my



Fig. 1. Cadaveric dissection, Wenzhou, China, 2012.

experience, the most common hand related issue in underserved countries relates to the stiff hand. The dynamics of the stiff hand, its causes, prevention and treatment can be covered during ward rounds, clinics, informal conversations, lectures, cadaveric dissections (Fig. 1), and in conjunction with surgical procedures. If a therapist is visiting a location for 1–2 weeks, it is much more realistic to focus on a few key aspects of the stiff hand rather than trying to teach a didactic survey course covering many topics.

Selecting an organization

When deciding if and when to serve, it is important to align yourself with an organization or group who's mission is consistent with your values and objectives. A number of factors may impact your decision such as the population served, out-of-pocket expenses, time commitment, faith, and whether to travel alone or with others. Obviously, each of these considerations presents unique advantages and drawbacks.

As an example, what might be some pros and cons to traveling alone, with family members, as part of a therapist/physician team or as a member of a larger group? Traveling as a single individual may provide advantages such as flexibility in scheduling your trip, greater autonomy, and ease of making adjustments while on site. Traveling with family members can help strengthen family bonds and give you an opportunity to pass along your values to the next generation. Collaboration between a therapist and physician can add additional expertise to the experience while also helping to demonstrate the potential benefit of doctors and therapists maintaining a close professional relationship. Finally, participating as part of a large group may add an added layer of comfort to

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