

# Global Health Training in Ophthalmology Residency Programs

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**PURPOSE:** To assess current global health education and international electives in ophthalmology residency programs and barriers to global health implementation in ophthalmology resident education.

**METHODS:** A web-based survey regarding participation in global health and international electives was emailed to residency program directors at 116 accredited ophthalmology residency programs via an Association of University Professors in Ophthalmology (AUPO) residency program director listserv.

**RESULTS:** Fifty-nine (51%) ophthalmology residency program directors responded. Thirty-seven program directors (63%) said global health was important to medical students when evaluating residency programs. Thirty-two program directors (55%) reported developing international electives. Reported barriers to resident participation in international electives were: 1) insufficient financial support, 2) inadequate resident coverage at home, and 3) lack of ACGME approval for international electives. Program directors requested more information about resident international electives, funding, and global ophthalmology educational resources. They requested ACGME recognition of international electives to facilitate resident participation. More than half (54%) of program directors supported international electives for residents.

**CONCLUSIONS:** This survey demonstrates that program directors believe global health is an important consideration when medical students evaluate training programs. Despite perceived barriers to incorporating global health opportunities into residency training, program directors are

interested in development of global health resources and plan to further develop global health opportunities. (J Surg 72:e52-e59. © 2015 Program Directors in Surgery. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.)

**KEY WORDS:** international electives, global health, ophthalmology, residency program curriculum, survey

**COMPETENCIES:** Patient Care, Medical Knowledge, Professionalism, Interpersonal and Communication Skills, Practice-Based Learning and Improvement, Systems-Based Practice

## INTRODUCTION

Ophthalmologists have been leaders of global health since the 1970s, from ORBIS International's flying eye hospitals surgical education missions to the SEVA Foundation's and the Carter Center's efforts to eradicate river blindness and treat trachoma.<sup>1-6</sup> The term global health refers to the complex relationship between the health of societies and the interdependence between them; it is concerned with pooling knowledge and resources with the goal of improving health and health equity for people worldwide.<sup>7</sup>

Global health training is an increasingly important component of medical education. Currently, more than 25% of medical trainees have pursued global health experiences before residency, and most medical schools now have global health incorporated into their curriculum.<sup>8,9</sup> Global health training is also an emerging trend in Graduate Medical Education. International electives, for example, are offered in residency training programs across a variety of specialties including anesthesia, pediatrics, otolaryngology, emergency medicine, and surgery.<sup>8,10-13</sup> The benefits of resident participation in global health training align with Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) training core competencies: medical knowledge, improved communication skills, increased cultural sensitivity and understanding, and improved systems-based practice.<sup>14-19</sup>

Study was conducted at the Weill Cornell Medical College, New York, NY.

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Global health and international opportunities were not formally recognized in ophthalmology residency training until July of 2013 when the ACGME Residency Committee (RC) for ophthalmology allowed credit for elective international rotations of up to 1 month.

The purpose of this study, conducted with the Global Alliances Secretariat of the American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO), was to gain information on global health initiatives in ophthalmology residency programs and to determine if additional resources are needed. We surveyed ophthalmology residency program directors to (1) evaluate the extent to which their programs and departments are participating in global health and international electives, (2) evaluate interest in global health, and (3) to identify perceived obstacles in implementing global health curricula and international electives in ophthalmology graduate medical education.

## METHODS

A web-based survey was designed to address ophthalmology residency program interest in global health and international electives, characterize the structure of such electives, and identify obstacles in sustaining these electives. The survey consisted of 16 questions: 13 multiple-choice and single-response questions and 3 additional free-text response questions (Table 1).

All 116 ACGME-accredited ophthalmology residency programs were invited to participate. The survey was sent to residency program directors via an Association of University Professors in Ophthalmology (AUPO) residency program director listserv in October 2012. A reminder e-mail was sent in January 2013 to those who had not responded. The response goal was to have greater than 50% participation from the ophthalmology program directors. Survey analysis was performed blind to any program identifiers to prevent any bias in the interpretation of responses.

To gain information on the broad range of activities in which ophthalmology residency programs participate, a strict definition of global health or global ophthalmology was omitted.

## RESULTS

### Participation and Interest in Global Health by Ophthalmology Residency Programs

A total of 59 program directors responded to the survey for a response rate of 51%. Of these, 37 (63%) felt that global health opportunities were either important or very important to medical students applying to ophthalmology residency programs.

In total, 32 programs reported developing or supporting programs abroad for residents. Of the 59 programs

represented in this survey, only 10 (17%) do not currently participate in global health. Of those 10 programs, 7 have plans for future participation. Moreover, 44 programs (75%) are considering increasing future participation above present levels (Fig. 1). Overall, 24 programs (41%) provide both educational resources for residents and are also supporting or developing programs abroad.

### Structure of Global Health Electives in Ophthalmology Residency Programs

Of the 59 ophthalmology residency programs who participated, 29 (50%) reported that their residents take part in global health electives that combine surgical and nonsurgical activities, and 21 programs (35%) have residents that participate in nonsurgical electives (Fig. 2). In total, 34 (58.3%) of programs have relationships with specific international sites or send their residents to sites that are known to their program's faculty members or alumni (Table 2).

Most programs allow residents to use either academic time (15 programs, 25.4%) or a combination of academic and vacation time (26 programs, 44.1%) for international electives, although 9 programs (15.3%) permitted international electives during resident vacation time alone.

### Departmental Support of Global Health Initiatives in Ophthalmology Residency Programs

In total, 33 programs (56%) support faculty in volunteer programs, 32 programs (54%) participate in exchange programs or hosting foreign fellows, and 23 departments (39%) collaborate on research in the developing world. In addition, 18 programs (31%) reported involvement in at least 2 of these 3 areas. Moreover, 13 programs (22%) were involved in all 3 areas questioned, and 1 program selected 4 answer choices indicating involvement beyond the specific areas mentioned in the survey.

Overall, 38 programs (65%) provide partial or full financial support to residents for their time abroad, with 18 programs (30%) providing partial or full financial support to faculty.

There is a global ophthalmology faculty director at 25 programs (42.4%), and 8 programs have a nonphysician administrative director (13.6%). There were 7 programs that indicated having both a faculty director as well as a nonphysician administrative director.

### Perceived Obstacles to Ophthalmology Residency Programs Participating in Global Health

The major obstacles to resident participation in global ophthalmology identified by this survey were as follows:

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