



Travel related illness in short-term volunteers from the UK to developing countries[☆]

Naomi Wyler^{a,*}, Samira Green^a, Nicola Boddington^a, Claire Davies^a, Karin Friedli^b, Ted Lankester^a

^a *InterHealth, 111 Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7HR, UK*

^b *University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, Hertfordshire AL10 9AB, UK*

Received 23 July 2011; received in revised form 25 February 2012; accepted 25 April 2012

Available online 28 May 2012

KEYWORDS

Gap year;
Overseas volunteer;
Diarrhoea;
Schistosomiasis;
Standby medication

Summary People of all ages volunteer in developing countries, but little is known about the health risks they face. InterHealth, a travel clinic, provides a health screening service for short-term overseas volunteers.

A cross-sectional study design was used to analyse 413 post-travel health questionnaires completed between February and November 2009. The sample consisted of volunteers who worked on short-term projects in developing countries for a variety of non-governmental organisations.

At least one sick day was taken by 137 (33.2%) participants. Medical care was accessed by 39 (9.6%) participants, and standby medication was used by 87 (21.6%) participants. Diarrhoea, especially amongst those aged under 20 or who visited Latin America, was the most commonly reported health problem (95; 23.9%). Possible exposure to schistosomiasis was reported by 56 (13.8%) participants, mostly from East Africa. Upon return, the majority of participants (371; 91.2%) reported feeling well.

The findings of this study show the importance of tailored post-travel health screening for short-term overseas volunteers. This study may help to tailor pre-departure travel health consultations for this group, particularly around food hygiene, hand washing and potential exposure to infection, but further research is needed to assess the impact of pre-travel health advice.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

[☆] This Research has been Presented on 17 December 2010 at The Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene's Annual Research in Progress Meeting (London, UK).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 020 7902 9000.

E-mail addresses: naomi.wyler@interhealth.org.uk (N. Wyler), samiragreen@doctors.org.uk (S. Green), nicki.boddington@interhealth.org.uk (N. Boddington), claire.davies@interhealth.org.uk (C. Davies), k.friedli1@herts.ac.uk (K. Friedli), ted.lankester@interhealth.org.uk (T. Lankester).

Introduction

Since the 1990s, there has been substantial growth in the volunteer tourism market, partly due to the increasing variety in available volunteer experiences.¹ In the United Kingdom alone, it is thought that 230,000 young people take gap years, 90,000 people take career breaks, and 200,000 people travel in their retirement.²

A gap year may be defined as 'time taken out of education or the workplace, for a purpose', for instance, personal development, or desire to make a difference in a developing country.³ Many people on a gap year will undertake voluntary work during their trip, often for international development charities. As well as the typical young gap year traveller who is pre-university or pre-employment, there are an increasing number of so called 'career gappers'.

Volunteering in a developing country may provide unique opportunities and experiences, but it is important to remember that these volunteers may be exposed to certain health risks along the way. Research into the health of gap year volunteers to developing countries is limited.⁴ The most significant study into health problems encountered by overseas volunteers was carried out by the UK-based organisation Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO).⁵ In a questionnaire based study conducted by VSO, in which participants were mainly between the ages of 26–45 years old and overseas for over 12 months, diarrhoea was found to be the most prevalent health problem (experienced by 79.9%), experienced less among older volunteers. VSO also reported that upon return, a quarter of volunteers reported ongoing medical or psychological problems.

Other research into travellers to developing countries with different study populations includes Hill's large prospective study of American travellers attending a travel health centre for advice before going to a developing country.⁶ Participants were given a card pre-travel to record any adverse events and were followed up post-travel. Hill found that diarrhoea was the most prevalent health problem abroad, occurring in 46% of travellers. Their results highlighted that attention should be paid to the prevention and therapy of traveller's diarrhoea, prophylaxis of malaria and management of respiratory illness. Dahlgren examined health risks and risk taking behaviour amongst humanitarian expatriates with the International Committee of the Red Cross, and found that they experienced significantly worse health whilst abroad and engaged in risky behaviour.⁷

Other studies focus on specific health problems, such as sexual health of backpackers or up-to-date incidence rates for travellers' diarrhoea.^{8,9} There are also studies into knowledge, attitudes and practices of specific groups of travellers; for example, research has been carried out into attitudes and practices of medical students towards travel health issues, and knowledge of travel related health issues in aid workers.^{10,11}

However, there is little research which describes the health problems encountered by short-term volunteers to developing countries on a pre-university gap year, summer holiday, or career break. This group deserves study to determine the health problems it faces overseas, as well as the pre-departure advice it needs to ensure that overseas voluntary work is not affected by sickness. Studies have also shown that effective communication in pre-travel

consultations may help to motivate travellers to respond to health risks encountered whilst abroad as well as influencing use of chemoprophylaxis for malaria^{12,13} If better informed, the volunteer may be less likely to engage in risky behaviour and more likely to take steps to prevent illness, for example by complying with prophylaxis or taking care with food hygiene.^{12,14}

InterHealth, a specialist travel health centre provides a pre- and post-travel health screening service for organisations sending participants overseas on voluntary short-term placements. This study uses data from the post-travel health questionnaire to summarise health problems faced overseas and upon return of short-term volunteers.

Methods

Design

A cross-sectional questionnaire was used to assess short-term volunteers' health overseas and on return to the UK.

Setting

InterHealth is a specialist travel clinic in London with charitable status, providing medicals, vaccinations, travel supplies, and psychological support predominantly to those working overseas in the relief and development sector.

Sample

The sample consisted of volunteers who belong to an organisation which sends participants on short-term voluntary placements to developing countries. Many of these organisations are faith-based, and typical activities carried out during the trip included community work, teaching, healthcare, expedition, sports, and construction. The volunteers were in group settings supervised by an experienced team leader.

Participation in health screening is mandatory for participants travelling with a number of organisations, although for many only pre-travel screening is mandated. This study includes participants from organisations who require post-travel health screening. Volunteers who spent more than six months overseas were excluded from the study.

Questionnaire

This study collated data from the post-travel health questionnaire, a questionnaire developed by InterHealth clinicians with extensive experience in travel medicine. The questionnaire covers basic demographics, the placement, illness encountered overseas, and state of health upon return to the UK. It specifically asks about diarrhoea, schistosomiasis, and malaria (Fig. 1). The questionnaire is not extensive; neither do the questions require detailed responses, although space for further information is available. The post-travel health questionnaire used at InterHealth has similarities to the questionnaire used in a study carried out by Bhatta et al. of Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) volunteers.³

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6126266>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6126266>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)