

Standards For Health-Related Global Experiences

Health Careers Center in cooperation with the Learning Abroad Center and the Forum on Education Abroad

What's the Problem?

Case 1

"My hands shook as I stitched up the patient. I had never done anything like this before. I cleaned up the blood and sent the patient on her way."

[Pre-med student on trip in South America]

Case 2

"I had never seen a baby born before, and to think I was delivering this baby! I stood waiting for the baby's head to appear, and could hardly believe what I was seeing and doing!"

[Pre-med student in Mexico]

These are real stories, with real potential dangers, as untrained pre-med and pre-health students travel to other countries as volunteers and provide healthcare services.

Potential Issues

The potential for negative outcomes is great when pre-health students perform tasks as a volunteer that they are not formally trained to do. Untrained volunteers can impact:

- Patient safety
- Student safety
- Community safety, coherence, and functioning
- Organizational efficiency
- Student school's reputation

Background

Every year pre-health and pre-clinical health professional students find opportunities to travel abroad, especially to developing countries, and have clinical experiences for which they are often untrained and ill-prepared.

Students take advantage of these opportunities for different reasons, including the belief that it will enhance their ability to get into health profession programs.

Most health profession admission committees require students to have "experience" interacting with patients. In this country, volunteer opportunities in health care are often restricted to serving as a patient-visitor in a hospital, performing clerical work, or other activities that are not direct-patient care. So students are attracted by the promise of getting patient care experience abroad.

Raising Awareness

The Health Careers Center became aware of what students were doing abroad by reading about their activities in journal assignments and personal statements.

These types of activities had been going on for years, and no one seemed to be asking questions about their appropriateness.

The HCC began investigating the need for a training tool to raise awareness and provide students with the knowledge and skills to assure a safe and appropriate global experience.

The HCC approached the Learning Abroad Center to explore the issue further. On March 15, 2010, they jointly hosted a special meeting with leaders from the Academic Health Center to investigate how to create or identify appropriate and relevant health-related global opportunities for students, and how to prepare students for those opportunities.

Representatives attended from Pharmacy, Public Health, Nursing, Medicine, IT, CLA, Health, and CBS. From that meeting came the unified recognition that **we need to help students know and respect boundaries while taking part in any global experiences.**

Recommendations

The group came up with a set of recommendations for the UMTC campus, and believe we need to:

- Include professional ethics and professionalism as we work with students.
- Assist student in understanding which activities are appropriate, and what they should not do and why.
- Provide training for students before they participate in a health-related experience abroad.

From this meeting, the HCC and LAC recognized the need for guiding principles or ethical standards. LAC raised the issue with the Forum on Education Abroad. They agreed, and will host a national conversation on the issue in Boston on April 5-8, 2011.

In preparation for the this meeting the HCC has worked with the Biomedical Library to conduct a comprehensive review of the literature regarding the development of these types of standards.

Current Status

Key Articles

A Caution Against Medical Student Tourism, by Mary Terrell White, PhD, and Katherine L. Cauley, PhD

Ethical Considerations for Short-term Experiences, by Trainees in Global Health John A. Crump, MB, ChB, DTM&H, Jeremy Sugarman, MD, MPH, MA

Global Health Ethics For Students, by Andrew D. Pinto and Ross E.G. Upshur

Global Health Training Ethics and Best Practice Guidelines for Training Experiences in Global Health, by John A. Crump and Jeremy Sugarman

Key Findings

- There is a growing awareness of the need to have comprehensive guidelines for student global health-related experiences.
- The challenges resulting from lack of standards puts:
 - Students at both physical and mental health risk
 - Patients and communities at risk
 - Health care organizations at risk
- While there are some guidelines for health profession students, those guidelines are not always relevant or meaningful for pre-health or pre-clinical health profession students.
- The issue is complex, and standards need to address global knowledge, cultural awareness, ethical practices, professionalism, scope of practice, and motivation.



Next Steps

Developing Standards

The Forum on Education Abroad meeting in Boston this April will discuss developing standards for global health experiences. While some ethical guidelines and best practices currently exist (Crump and Sugarman), the Forum will review those standards against the unique situation of pre-health and pre-clinical health professionals to determine if they are adequate.



Developing the Learning Module

The Health Careers Center will use the information from the Forum as the foundation for an online self-study workshop for both pre-health and health profession students. Students will be encouraged to complete this workshop prior to taking part in a global experience. The workshop will be available beginning in fall 2011.

The current plan is for the workshop to include information on:

- Why the workshop was created
- Why having a global experience is important for students interested in health careers
- Finding the right global health experience
- Meeting academic requirements
- Understanding boundaries: professional, ethical, and cultural
- Making the most of a global experience
- Applying what they have learned when they return home

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