

## CAREERS IN INTERNATIONAL HEALTH

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### Background

This chapter reviews types of positions available for physicians considering careers in international health, be they short-term assignments or longer term career choices in locations outside the United States and Canada. The focus is on opportunities available in less developed countries, and also includes international type work at "home". The chapter additionally presents information about preparing for international health careers as well as a short list of practical resources useful for identifying positions abroad.

### Types of International Positions

#### Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also called private voluntary organizations (PVOs)

There are numerous NGOs and PVOs providing care throughout the world in various settings, including longer-term development projects and disaster relief, refugee care, and humanitarian assistance. They may be church affiliated or non-sectarian. Church-affiliated agencies may require that the physician be of the respective religion and that she/he participate in religious activities. Because many paying positions require five or more years of international health experience in addition to fluency in at least one foreign language, it is often a practical consideration to seek a volunteer position in an NGO as the first step to gaining this experience. Volunteer positions may range from very short-term (e.g., one to two weeks) to longer

term (e.g., minimum of one year). For example, a number of organizations put together specialized teams of doctors and nurses to fly into an area, where they perform a large number of operations, such as cleft palate repairs, over the course of one to two weeks. Postoperative care is provided by local medical staff. Other organizations offer primary care to a region where such care is not available. Many of these trips require the physicians to pay their own expenses and a contribution to the sponsoring organization, as well. This type of assignment fits easily into most physicians' schedules and service trips are available for most specialties. Fluency in the native language is rarely required for short-term assignments, although it is always an asset. Examples include Flying Doctors of America, Operation Rainbow, Medical Missions International, Christian Medical and Dental Society, and Operation Smile.

Some NGOs require experience and longer commitments for volunteer positions. For longer assignments, most NGOs pay airfare and many provide housing free of charge. They may also provide a stipend, which is small compared to U.S. or Canadian salaries, but adequate for living in the country of service. Another important consideration is that many student loans can be deferred during periods of volunteer service. Examples of organizations that provide loan deferments include the American Refugee Committee, Doctors Without Borders, and Catholic Relief Services.

Types of professional activities in these positions may vary, from direct clinical care to program development and public health. Generally, longer term positions include a public health component, with or without direct patient care.

NGOs also offer paying positions. These require longer commitments, usually on the order of one year or longer. People working

in these settings generally already have appropriate experience in underserved and/or international settings. These positions are often more administrative and supervisory, and require language fluency. They may be located at a U.S. or Canadian headquarters, with periodic travel required to countries where programs are based. Training in public health, such as a master of public health degree, is often an asset.

### **Government Agencies**

A number of government agencies offer positions with international assignments, either long-term or short-term. As this author is more familiar with U.S. agencies, examples of these will be provided

Peace Corps Medical Officers tend to the health and safety of Peace Corps volunteers in host countries. The officer may be based in one location, but be responsible for volunteers in several neighboring countries. There is generally limited contact with people from the host country. The maximum length of service is five years.

The U.S. Agency for International Development offers positions for Population/Health Officers, who advise foreign governments and private sector leaders in health care delivery, programming, finance, and other aspects of care. These positions often require public health training and prior work experience in a foreign country. Language skills are required, but may be obtained after hire.

The U.S. Public Health Service Office of International Health provides liaison and technical support to international health agencies such as the World Health Organization, and is largely focused on research and foreign exchange.

The U.S. Department of State Regional Medical Officers serve employees of the U.S. Government, dependents and local

employees of the respective embassy or post. Each tour of duty is two to three years. Only family practice, internal medicine or emergency medicine-trained physicians are eligible.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), based in Atlanta, has numerous opportunities for international health assignments. Some assignments require frequent travel for collaborative research projects with other countries, while others offer periodic opportunities as need arises, such as evaluation of a U.S. government sponsored feeding program or assistance with a cholera outbreak in a refugee camp. An excellent way to gain a position with the CDC is to enter their two-year epidemiology training program, the Epidemic Intelligence Service, for which physicians are eligible post-residency.

### **International Organizations**

This refers to organizations such as the World Health Organization, Pan American Health Organization, and World Food Programme. These positions are non-clinical. While the employee may be based, for example, in Geneva, frequent travel to developing countries is expected to assist with program development and evaluation. Because of requirements to have representation from member countries, it is extremely competitive for Americans and may require persistence to obtain a position.

### **Academic Positions**

Being a faculty member at an academic institution can provide international health opportunities of various types, but often requires more initiative on the part of the physician to develop activities that will be supported by the school or worked into his or her schedule. Faculty can develop collaborative research projects with counterparts in developing countries, from basic science to epidemiological research.

The faculty member's involvement may be educational, such as setting up exchange programs for students and residents in the host country with his or her school. Also, the faculty member may serve as an advisor to students seeking international elective experiences. Or, he or she could be the head of a division exclusively focused on international health, such as a tropical or geographical medicine division. Some faculty have worked out agreements with their department to allow them a certain number of months leave (paid or unpaid) to work in a developing country. Most schools of public health have international programs, so medical faculty working at universities with schools of public health usually have more options for collaborative work on international projects.

### **Consulting**

Short-term consulting is available to those with specific expertise. For example, a developing country interested in starting a residency program in a certain discipline may retain one or more educators from an established program to assist in the development of this program. The U.S. Agency for International Development frequently retains consultants to evaluate its various development programs around the world. These are generally bid for by contracting agencies, such as John Snow, Inc., that subcontract with experts to constitute the work team. It is possible to earn a living going from consultancy to consultancy as an independent contractor.

### **Home Country Positions**

A physician does not always need to leave home to be involved in activities that have an international flavor. These positions include running travelers' clinics, working with refugees or victims of torture who have found refuge in the United States or Canada, working with the Indian Health Service, and practicing in urban or rural underserved

communities. The latter have many problems common to those found in international settings, including lack of resources for access to adequate care. In fact, many people who work abroad frequently return home to work in such settings, or may begin in such positions and "graduate" to international work based on this foundation.

### **General Preparation and Training**

The first question students often ask is, "What specialty is best for a career in international health?" The answer is that opportunities in international health are available to essentially all specialties, but the type of specialty will determine the number and range of assignments. Generally, the following specialties provide the best preparation for the largest number and types of positions: primary care (family

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practice, pediatrics, or internal medicine), and obstetrics and gynecology. General surgical training is often of benefit in humanitarian disaster settings and specialty surgical training is necessary to qualify for organizations providing short-term specialty care, such as repair of facial or limb anomalies. Additional training in tropical infectious diseases may be advantageous. Public health training is beneficial in many positions. This may be obtained through studying for a master of public health or a doctorate in public health degree. Many administrative positions require this advanced training. A Certificate of Knowledge in Clinical Tropical Medicine and Travelers' Health is newly available

through the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene. It is not known to what extent this credential may be required in the future. Language proficiency in at least one foreign language other than English is usually required for a career in international health, unless one chooses to work in a limited number of countries in which English is spoken. French or Spanish are generally best, but knowledge of other languages, depending on one's destination, is also advantageous. As mentioned earlier, a "Catch 22" of international work is that most paying positions (and some nonpaying ones) require years of experience. How does one get experience? The physician can begin in medical school and residency through elective rotations in developing countries. While this isn't enough, it helps develop the necessary sensibility and awareness. The physician can work in underserved or cross-cultural settings in the United States or Canada to gain experience. Finally, one can volunteer (short or long term) with NGOs that have less strict requirements for prior experience. Joining an ongoing project with a team in place provides an ideal setting for a first assignment. Above and beyond possessing relevant experience, the ability to adjust to changing circumstances beyond one's control, flexibility, and respect for the practices and customs of host countries are critical characteristics needed to successfully navigate working in an international health setting.

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## Resources

There are a number of organizations, publications, web sites, and job placement services that can aid the search for international health positions. Examples of each are listed below, but this is not meant to be an exhaustive list. The examples are provided to give the reader an idea of the types of services and resources available.

## Organizations

The International Health Medical Education Consortium (IHMEC) is a consortium of faculty and health care educators dedicated to international health education in U.S. and Canadian medical schools and residency programs (see the description in the Introduction to this guide). Joining IHMEC is a great way to network with others interested in international health education; many members have considerable international health experience. Tel: (919) 962-0000, [www.ihmec.org](http://www.ihmec.org)

Global Health Council (GHC), formerly called the National Council for International Health, is a non-profit membership organization that was established during the 1970's to identify priority health problems and to report on them to the U.S. public, Congress, international and domestic governmental agencies, academic institutions, and the global health community. It includes hundreds of private and public organizations as well as several thousand professionals based in and outside the United States. The GHC publishes the *Directory of U.S.-Based Agencies in International Health* (a very comprehensive listing of over 700 organizations) and sponsors an annual meeting at which a job placement service takes place. Tel: (202) 833-5900, [www.globalhealth.org](http://www.globalhealth.org).

American Public Health Association (APHA) is an organization committed to promoting the public's health. While the

main focus is American public health, there is an active international health section and the annual meeting offers many sessions with an international focus. The APHA also sponsors a job fair at its annual meeting. Tel: (202) 789-5674, [www.apha.org](http://www.apha.org).

American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene (ASTMH), founded in 1951, is an organization representing scientists, clinicians, and others with interests in the prevention and control of tropical diseases through research and education. The ASTMH publishes the monthly *American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene* and *Health Hints for the Tropics*. The latter booklet is a useful source of information for the traveler or long-term residents living abroad. Tel: (847) 480-9592, [www.astmh.org](http://www.astmh.org).

### **Publications**

A number of professional organizations, such as those cited previously, publish newsletters, books, and journals that provide information that may be of assistance to physicians seeking employment in international settings, and to enhance their knowledge of pertinent issues related to international health and development. For example, the Global Health Council's *Directory of U.S. -Based Agencies* has already been described; the APHA and ASTMH publish their own journals. The World Health Organization publishes periodicals and special reports and also provides job offerings on its web site, [www.who.org](http://www.who.org).

A useful publication is *Monday Developments*, which is published biweekly and provides information about developments of interest to the NGO/PVO community, as well as an extensive classified section for paying and volunteer international positions. It is published by InterAction: American Council for Voluntary International Action, a coalition of over 150 private voluntary organizations

involved in international humanitarian efforts. An individual subscription costs \$65 per year. Publications Department, InterAction, 1717 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Suite 701, Washington, DC 20036, Tel: (202) 667-8227, [www.interaction.org/md/index.html](http://www.interaction.org/md/index.html).

Membership in the International Career Employment Center entitles the member to access to current international job openings on the web site and to their weekly publication, *International Career Employment Weekly*. Jobs in international health as well as other disciplines are included. Membership prices vary depending on the length of membership (one-year individual membership is \$149). International Careers, 1088 Middle River Road, Stanardsville, VA 22973, Tel: 800-291-4618, [www.internationaljobs.org](http://www.internationaljobs.org).

### **Web Sites**

International Health Medical Education Consortium (IHMEC): [www.unmc.edu/Community/ihmec](http://www.unmc.edu/Community/ihmec). Contains an *Annotated List of International Health Related Web Sites* including over 65 listings (with linkages) of educational programs and courses, governmental organizations, multilateral organizations, membership organizations, non-governmental organizations, and job and field placement opportunities. Many of the sites listed also have linkages to other related sites. This is a great starting point!

### **Job Opportunities and Placement Services**

The IHMEC web site described above is a good place to start (look under "job and field placement opportunities" within the *Annotated List of International Health Related Web Sites*).

OPTIONS is an international health recruitment and referral service of Projec

Concern International. It helps link volunteer professionals with programs, hospitals, and clinics worldwide. Annual membership costs \$25. There is also a small placement fee. 3550 Afton Road, San Diego, CA 92123, Tel: (619) 279-9690.

American Public Health Association (see above for contact information) has a job placement fair at its annual meeting, with international positions available.

Global Health Council (see above for contact information) has a job placement fair at its annual meeting. It also has a huge number of exhibitions from international agencies, programs, placement services, and others. It's a great way to find out about positions and to network with international health professionals.

John Snow, Inc., is one of many agencies that provide 1 -term and short-term technical assistance to projects worldwide. These agencies often seek the services of professionals to comprise project teams for different assignments of differing lengths. The professional places an application and curriculum vitae with the agency and is contacted as appropriate opportunities arise. A great way to learn more about these agencies is to attend the Global Health Council annual meeting and visit the booths in the exhibition hall. John Snow, Inc. International Division, 44 Farnsworth Street Boston, MA 02210, [www.johnsnow.org](http://www.johnsnow.org).