

CULTURAL ASPECTS OF HEALTH CARE IN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

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Introduction

One of IHMEC's principal goals is to provide opportunities for medical students and residents to study and work in cultures outside their own. Borrowing from one anthropologist's perspective, culture may be described as "systems of shared ideas, systems of concepts and rules and meanings that underlie and are expressed in the ways that human beings live".* For health professionals and professional -in-training the process of working internationally may result in ongoing comparative study of elements of culture they know at home with those with which they are confronted while abroad. Much has been written on the topic by specialists in a variety of fields and, in addition to publications intended specifically for an audience of international professionals, "specialty" literatures exist in several areas: medical anthropology, medical sociology, public health, maternal and child health, environmental health, occupational health, cross-cultural psychology, and refugee health among others. Additionally, provision of health care in North America often parallels work carried out overseas, and fields with relevant documentation include studies of domestic care among urban or rural communities of ethnic minorities, immigrants, refugees, families, and others.

Medical students, residents, and health professionals often take part in international work without having the benefit of extended periods for detailed study of the culture of countries to be visited. As a result, this portion of preparation may frequently be relegated to a lower priority. The annotated

list below is intended to serve as a practical starting point for relatively rapid review by busy health workers planning work abroad. In addition, contrary to what many students and others may believe, English is not spoken everywhere, and health care providers may find they must adapt to environments in which communications take place on a comparatively rudimentary level. In the following chapter we therefore include basic references to aid in language preparation, including guidelines available online on the IHMEC web site.

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* Keesing R. *Cultural Anthropology: A Contemporary Perspective*. NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. 1981:68.

References

1. *Cross-Cultural Medicine: What to Know Before You Go*, American Medical Student Association (AMSA). Written as a rapid review by medical students for medical students, a series of short essays on what to look for in the practice of medicine overseas. The goals are to assist the transition to other cultures by "helping develop an appreciation, sensitivity, and preparedness for encountering the host country's culture, politics, economics, social setting and religion, and how they impact health".
2. Krogh C, Pust R, *International Health: A Manual for Advisers and Students*, Society of Teachers of Family Medicine (STFM). Guidelines for those advising medical students and residents in preparation for cross-cultural encounters. The publication is

available online in full text format on the web site of the STFM International Committee, rushu.rush.edu/familymed/stfm.

3. Helman C. *Culture, Health, and Illness*. Butterworth-Heinemann, third edition. Written by a medical anthropologist for practicing clinicians and other health professionals, a “classic” in the field. Thirteen chapters illustrate broad concepts in medical anthropology; extensive use of case studies provides practical applications for theoretical concepts.

4. Werner D, Bower B. *Helping Health Workers Learn*. Hesperian Foundation. Lavishly illustrated manual is written at an elementary level of understanding for rural health workers in developing countries (and is also quite appropriate for learning by medical students, residents, and health professionals!) Many examples of role playing, and “how to’s” for breaking down social/cultural barriers in effective learning for health. Since it is translated into 50+ languages it might also serve as a hand reference for students requiring further study of local languages. The Hesperian Foundation additionally publishes several other health care guides written for a similar audience.

5. Desjarlais R. *World Mental Health: Problems and Priorities in Low -Income Countries*. Oxford University Press. Succinct survey of mental health and behavioral problems, violence, displacement, and problems of special populations at levels of individual, community, and larger society in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

6. Brownlee A. *Community, Culture, and Care; A Cross-Cultural Guide for health Workers*. Mosby. Thorough treatise on multiple types of cross-cultural challenges, and ways to confront detailed problems in community health and development programs. The book is divided into three main sections: practical methods of investigation; general community systems;

and community health beliefs and systems. The text is recommended especially for advanced students and professionals.

7. Galanti G. *Caring for Patients from Different Cultures; Case Studies from American Hospitals*. University of Pennsylvania Press. Case vignettes and their interpretation, utilizing a wide variety of examples from U.S. hospitals and clinics.

8. Wotton K *et al.* , *Basic Concepts of International Health Module* , Canadian University Consortium for Health in Development. Written in module format for a several day course, an accompanying volume provides readings on a variety of related topics.

9. Kohls L. *Survival Kit for Overseas Living*. Intercultural Press, third edition. Concise handbook for those planning to spend extended periods abroad. Offers suggestions on preparation for departure as well as the return home, with multiple lists to assist in rapid review of practical points. Interspersed throughout are illustrations and explanations drawn from the field of socio-cultural anthropology.

10. Travel guides frequently provide cultural information for shorter- and longer-term visits abroad, and locations of academies for immersion language study. Particularly notable for relatively in-depth coverage are those published in the *Lonely Planet* and *Footprint* series of guides.

Selected Web Sites

1. American Medical Student Association (AMSA) – Global Health Action Standing Committee, amsa.org.

2. Hesperian Foundation, hesperian.org. Publisher of a number of guides intended for use by community health workers, and also useful for professionals working abroad as general references in cross-cultural health care. Some of the publications are translated

into fifty or more languages, and can serve as language study guides.

3. International Committee of the Society of Teachers of Family Medicine (STFM), rushu.rush.edu/familymed/stfm or through the main STFM web site stfm.org. Includes full text of Krogh C, Pust R, *International Health: A Manual for Advisers and Students*.

4. NAFSA, nafsa.org. Suggestions and guidelines from a national organization of educators who work with study abroad programs.

5. Sage Publications, sagepub.co.uk. Extensive list of publications on a variety of cross-cultural topics.

6. World Organization of Family Physicians (WONC), wonca.org.