



# Volunteering to Work Overseas



## Decisions

It is a major decision to work overseas as a volunteer in a less well developed region of the world. Nevertheless in the vast majority of cases it is a decision which is never regretted as it exposes the volunteer to a life which they would otherwise never have known and it almost always helps to mould the individual into a different person - perhaps one who is less self-centred and more aware of what is going on in the 'real world' out there. The volunteer needs to recognise that they will never 'save the world' but that their small input may have distinct life changing consequences for some of the individuals who cross their path. The other crucial issue which needs to be recognised is the fact that in almost every case the volunteer gains far more from the experience than they themselves put into the work and that they learn tremendously from those they will have contact with day by day. In our 21st century world we hear that 'patience is a virtue' but it is not until we get to a place like central Africa where we see it in action! Those considering becoming a volunteer who display little of this essential attribute should perhaps reconsider their calling and look into another avenue for their lives.

## Before you leave

The decision is finally made, the destination and scope of work decided, the family are both proud and distinctly distraught - so, what's next? Well many organisations will insist on a medical certification confirming that you are in good general health, after all nobody wants you sick overseas - least of all you yourself! This pre-departure health check will cover four main issues which should be carried out in every case.

1. Checking that the volunteer is in good general medical and psychological health sufficient for their destination.
2. Obtaining base-line levels for various simple blood tests so that these are available if sickness occurs and comparisons need to be made.
3. Ensuring that required and recommended vaccines are up-to-date for the destination and that issues relating to malaria prophylaxis are clearly understood.
4. Organising whatever is required to allow for easy contact between the volunteer and the home medical centre in case medical problems should arise while abroad.

## Checking general health issues:

Some chronic conditions may not affect your travel plans but nevertheless it is essential to know about them before you reach an area with poorer medical facilities. For instance a borderline diabetic individual may not have been diagnosed prior to departure but the change in diet while abroad (increased carbohydrate intake etc) may lead to a difficult medical situation. The same holds true for those with a past history of mild psychological issues which may become exacerbated by the isolation experienced in the posting and also potentially by certain malaria prophylaxis. In most cases the medical history (personal and family history and also covering issues like allergies, drug medications, previous operations etc) and also the physical examination, reveals nothing of note. Extremely boring from the medical point of view (!) but good news for the individual concerned.

## Base-line blood levels

Ideally the volunteers haemoglobin, their white cells, liver function tests, their blood group and a simple urine test for diabetes etc should be checked. Ideally also some blood plasma should be frozen and stored so that further tests can be carried out should the need arise. A report on these investigations should be passed on to both the individual (and also frequently to their organisation) so that easy access to them is always available in an emergency.

## Checking Vaccines and Malaria prophylaxis

This will very much depend on the planned location and the proposed workload for the volunteer. There are distinct differences between the potential risks associated with an administration role based in a major urban centre, the sanitation worker whose hands and feet are regularly exposed to ..... and the medical staff dealing with body fluids each and every day. Every individual needs to be treated as such and the consultation to identify their medical and vaccine needs will usually take at least 30 to 40 minutes on the initial visit. There is no place here for a rushed consultation expecting every volunteer to require the same vaccines. Sight of any past vaccines will be important as this may mean that certain ones are still working or that the individual may only require a single booster to bring them back up-to-date and provide cover. Talking through the issues relating to correct malaria advice is a minefield! This requires a detailed knowledge of the destination and how the individual expects to get there in the first place. The prescribing doctor also needs to understand that it is very likely that the volunteer may have periods of rest and relaxation whereby they will frequently travel to a significantly different region for anything from a few days to a few weeks. The risks to their personal health in this other location may be seriously different to what they had been exposed to initially. [This is where easy access to home advice may become so very important (usually via email or phone/fax) so that the correct advice and precautions can be covered.] Malaria prophylaxis is very much an individual issue and one that cannot be covered in just a few lines. The arguments against its use are usually weak and an individual volunteer should be very slow to change what was recommended without making contact with the doctor who was involved in their health preparations in the first place. (see section below about trusting 'local experts'!)

## Overseas contact

With the expansion of both the Internet and satellite phones there are few areas of our planet where contact is impossible - parts of Wexford may be the exception! The medical facility where the individual was seen before their trip should provide a full 24/7 contact service in case of emergency. In many situations it is not for a complete emergency but rather just to bounce a few ideas around to try to make a sensible decision on behalf of the volunteer while they are abroad. Some organisations insist that this medical contact is done via their own medical personnel on the ground or at home in head-office so that they are kept informed of any potential health orientated situation which is understandable. However having the possibility of direct contact with medical personnel at home can at times be life-saving but at the very least may help to abate a major cause for concern.

## While abroad

Arriving into a new situation, surrounded by a new family of other volunteers and often trying to learn a new language (let alone a new set of values and protocols!) is a really daunting task. Exciting as it is, during these first days the individual volunteer may frequently wonder why on earth they decided to leave family and friends back home! The support of their new colleagues is essential and the volunteer needs to learn both patience and pacing. Trying to do too much initially will lead to exhaustion and this may weaken the body and, for instance, allow a mild stomach upset become more serious. The lack of medical facilities may increase the individuals personal stress levels as

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Web Address: [www.tmb.ie](http://www.tmb.ie)

This leaflet has been prepared using information supplied from WHO, the Center for Disease Control (US) and other international sources.

- ✓ Travel Accessories *VolunteersHealth/TMB/updated12Mar09*
- ✓ Tropical Diagnostic Laboratory
- ✓ Tropical Disease Screening Centre
- ✓ W.H.O. registered Yellow Fever Vaccination Centre
- ✓ International Vaccination and Malaria Advice Centres

- ✓ Aston Quay/Usit
- ✓ Blanchardstown
- ✓ Bray
- ✓ Cork
- ✓ Clarehall
- ✓ Dun Laoghaire
- ✓ Galway
- ✓ Gorey

- ✓ Grafton Street
- ✓ Inchicore
- ✓ Kerry
- ✓ Letterkenny
- ✓ Limerick
- ✓ Maynooth
- ✓ Naas
- ✓ Ongar

- ✓ Shannon
- ✓ Sligo
- ✓ Stillorgan
- ✓ Tinahely
- ✓ Walkinstown
- ✓ Waterford

they try to convince themselves that they may not actually have contracted a severe fatal bug in their first days in the tropics! In many situations there will be a series of formal or informal orientation sessions with the other members of the team and this allows some semblance of normality to take control. The first night in the tropics is always exciting! There are often noises which you would never have heard before even in the most rural Irish situation! This linked with your inexperience of using a mosquito net and the rather poor bathroom facilities (definitely not 5 star!) often lead to a disturbed night sleep - especially when the activities of the day start as soon as the sun rises at about 6am! Not a typical Irish life style and one that takes many some time to get used to! Lack of sleep is a major cause of stress.

### Specific health issues

Probably the one weakest part of any individual's health is their bowels. Taking care of this organ - especially in the first weeks - is essential and it is worth its weight in gold for general well-being and overall job satisfaction. The volunteer needs to remember that the other members of their team may have been there for some time and so they have adapted somewhat. Mind you, even after many months you will still be liable to various gut wrenching parasites so care is always needed. Sun exposure and lack of sufficient clean water may lead to dehydration especially if the workload is heavy and it requires the individual to travel extensive distances between their work sites. Salt depletion is very common in the first few weeks (excessive perspiration etc) and this requires a careful balance between replacement and over indulgence. Salt tablets should be avoided and just sprinkling food with sufficient table salt should replace what is missing.

### Staying fit & healthy

It is very difficult to maintain any level of fitness while overseas in many regions of the tropics. The sun sets at 6pm and there may be little opportunity to get out and about after that time. If it has been a busy day very frequently the volunteer will flop into a chair and just vegetate! During this vegetation process (!) it is tempting to over consume both alcohol and cigarettes to the long term determinant of their health. Those planning to give up cigarettes while abroad are usually in for a rude awaking as in most cases this is a distinctly forlorn hope and totally unachievable. For any who have significantly cut down on their smoking before leaving Ireland (thanks Michael Martin!) it is wise for them to arrive and announce themselves as a 'non-smoker' as otherwise they tend to get pressurised into increasing their intake just because of the others they are living among.

### Personality clashes

The new working companions may not have been the volunteers first choice under different circumstances! This is their new 'tropical family' and learning to live together with each others peculiarities is often quite a feat. Volunteers tend to be individuals with a strong outgoing personality and with a high belief in their activities and possibly also their ability to discern what is right and when others are wrong. Stir all this group together, add in a touch of isolation, poorer social activities (frequently none except a good book - but too dark to read properly and many mosquitoes attracted by the light!), add in some ill health and you have the potential powder keg waiting to explode. This is where a good balanced team leader is go important to ensure that any potential conflicts are dealt with at an early opportunity and that team members have the chance to express themselves but they are also given clear leadership. The good listening ear of the more senior members of the group (perhaps a respected local friend) often abates the situation before disaster occurs.

### Stress, Strain and Sex

There can be little doubt that working in the tropics has its own set of stressful situations. Living among this newly found family and surrounded by many with a different set of values and regularly spending time travelling great distances between sites may lead to an unusual sense of dependance and friendliness between volunteers or volunteers and some of the local population. Friendships, which would never have seen the light of day back home, race forward at an unexpected pace. This sense of the normal need for companionship, coupled with a few drinks too

many, may lead to an unfortunate situation. Knowing your limits and recognising the potential consequences of each and every action at an early stage may help to control a situation before it spirals out of control. [Remember what your mother always told you!!]

### Malaria protection

In many regions of the tropics the risk of malaria is high and the individual needs to be constantly aware of how to protect themselves. This can be summarised as the ABCD of malaria protection. **A**, Avoid the mosquito bites (repellents, nets, cover the exposed areas of the body etc) **B**, Being aware of how serious this disease can become so rapidly with fatal consequences. **C**, Careful attention to any possible symptoms so that a rapid diagnosis can be made and **D**, taking the correct Drugs to protect against the disease. There is no perfect drug which provides 100% protection without side-effects for all travellers. Each individual is just that - an individual who requires personal attention from the medical practitioner looking after them to ensure that they have the right drug for their personal circumstance. Nevertheless, after all the care and attention, it is up to each individual to make the crucial decision as to whether or not they will follow that advice while they are abroad. This is where the 'local experts' come into play as mentioned above. These may be the volunteers who have arrived just a few months before you but have now become 'experts' and they regularly dish out significant medical advice to any who will listen. For the newly arrived volunteer this is an extremely confusing situation as now they have to make a difficult decision. Do they listen to the medical practitioner they met at home (perhaps 6000 miles away!) or to the local colleagues and people who seem to know the situation so very well? Well, this is where the 24/7 contact with medical cover at home comes into play. Of course the volunteer should listen to what is being said locally but then check it through with their medical adviser at home. The final decision will rest with the individual volunteer but at least they will have a more balanced platform on which to base their decision.

### Accidents overseas

Every year we hear stories of volunteers getting caught up in horrific accidents sometimes with a fatal outcome. Most of the organisations sending volunteers overseas have very strict rules regarding driving while overseas and these are there for very good reason. Nevertheless accidents do occur and it is essential that protocols are in place prior to this to ensure that the best possible treatment is available at all times. The presence of adequate medivac insurance is also essential so that this financial worry does not lead to unhelpful and less than ideal decisions being made.

### Summary

There is much more that could be said with regard to preparing the volunteer for their overseas posting and keeping them healthy while abroad. As already mentioned, every situation, every volunteer, every posting has to be dealt with in a unique way and the notes above will not cover every eventuality and every circumstance. The care by the organisation during the initial selection process is essential where the potential volunteer seeks to understand the job description on offer and recognises the organisations personal skill in looking after its staff both at its home base and overseas.

The organisation needs to assess if this potential volunteer has the technical skills needed for the position in question but also, perhaps even more essentially, that will they fit in with and add to the team they already have in place at the location in question. This may take a few meetings as frequently the initial one is a unique experience for the volunteer and they may be distinctly on edge. They also may not always remember all the questions they would like to have answered. Talking to volunteers who have travelled with the organisation in the past (especially to the specific posting in question) would be extremely helpful.

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