



Highly Effective Volunteers

For some, volunteering may mean taking their job on the road and performing their skills in a different environment. For HVO, the concept is much broader as volunteers are seen as change agents, with a goal of improving the availability and quality of health care in developing countries. That can often seem like a monumental task, as you look around and see few resources and busy, overwhelmed health care workers. As many experienced volunteers will say, the first thing to do is stop, take a deep breath, and get to know your new environment. Observe the culture, watch how people interact, and listen to what they have to say. To effect real, sustainable change requires shifting attitudes and behaviors, all of which takes time.

As a short-term volunteer training and educating colleagues, it is very difficult to see the impact your work has on a particular site. Change occurs over time and one of the most important aspects of volunteer service is role modeling. Physical therapist Michael Ferdun noted in a trip report, "The challenge is always how to be of use. Naturally, you want to improve the care given, but local caregivers are the ones who must take ownership of this. The difficulty is finding the balance between simply being a resource versus someone who

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leaves behind a legacy of improved systems for the students, staff, and hospital. As more senior volunteers have told me more than once, sometimes simply being a role model is the most important part of a volunteer assignment." After pediatrician Shaun Berger noticed a lack of soap meant many of the physicians did not regularly wash their hands, he bought a bottle of alcohol gel and carried it in his lab coat. "I gelled and shared with my colleagues between all patient encounters. I had noticed one of the Infectious Disease doctors doing the same, and realized one more physician modeling this easy, affordable intervention could start a trend, and have a lasting impact."

As a volunteer in another culture, you will always be observed and it's best to consider yourself in a "fishbowl" environment. You will be different - whether it is due to your race, ethnicity, height, weight, gender role according to their culture, assumption that, as a westerner, you are "rich", etc. - and your every move will be considered. Take advantage of that role, to politely model behaviors that might make your colleagues' work more effective. Physicians can show respect for the nurses on the ward and their input in patient care. Physical therapists can model polite, caring interaction with patients. A key component of role modeling is listening to the needs and concerns of both patients and

colleagues. Many health professionals in developing countries work in isolation and, as a volunteer, they appreciate the interaction and feedback you are able to offer as a peer. This is particularly true of department chairs, who may have no one with whom to share their concerns. Volunteers can serve as excellent "sounding boards" since they are outside the system and can speak as professional peers.

Volunteers often note that patients, and even other staff members, will turn to them, as foreigners, for advice rather than to the local provider. This is an excellent opportunity to model respect for the local provider, and defer to their decisions, acknowledging their understanding of the patient's situation and culture.

Volunteers also serve as change agents in modeling expectations. Dr. Martin Hobdell has been working with oral health programs in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam for a number of years and has been fortunate to see major changes as a result. He marvels at the profound personal change he has witnessed in one of his colleagues. Assigned to assist him in a study, the shy woman spoke little English but quickly grasped the needs of the study and did so well with the project that she made her first journey abroad to present it at an international conference. The process of presenting, and witnessing the impact of such a conference spurred her to study English at night, which led to her serving as an interpreter for the graduate level course at her university. Her interest and commitment led to a scholarship in another Asian country where she learned enough of the language to earn her graduate degree. Dr. Hobdell notes that "she has changed from a timid, retiring girl to a confident, very capable woman who now works full-time as a teacher and mentor to both undergraduate and graduate students" in the dental faculty where she trained.



How can you have such an effect on a colleague, when time is short, you may not speak the same language, and you have a scheduled agenda? A key component of effective volunteering is learning to let go, and adapt to the new environment. Recognize that working in a developing country where resources are limited will not be the same as working in your home country. As Robert L. Burger stated about his experience volunteering in hematology, "It is very hard to impart one's own standards to the care of a patient in a developing country. One has to accept the limitations in care and the limited resources, and be ready to compromise, but strive to use your knowledge to give the best care."



Learning to let go means having reasonable expectations of what can be done, and accepting that there are different solutions to a problem. Volunteers are always guests at a site and no matter how many times you have visited, you will always be an outside advisor. There may be situations that would be addressed differently in your home environment, but decisions related to scheduling, personnel, use of equipment, etc. must ultimately be left to

the institute or the Ministry of Health. Persistence in tactfully modeling behaviors and attitudes, however, can bring about changes that would not occur otherwise.

Anesthesiologist Krzysztof Laudanski has noted:

Volunteering in the teaching capacity can be very rewarding. A lot depends on the personal attitude. Do not have too many expectations. Just embrace what comes. We are always guests for our hosts. At the beginning, observation will be very valuable versus expressing opinions. It may take some time to acclimate and to understand that certain things are being done differently compared to the USA. Things may look crazy at the beginning but there is a lot of common sense after all when local conditions are appreciated and understood.

Research that has focused on successful volunteers has identified an essential set of core personal traits: flexibility or adaptability, patience, openness, innovativeness, and integrity.

Flexibility is crucial to letting go! You may arrive with a detailed PowerPoint presentation only to find the power is out for the day, your audience has been pulled into an emergency surgery, or the Minister of Health has arrived, trumping your presentation. Adapting to the local culture's constraints, slower pace, and social gatherings are crucial to building trust, and developing camaraderie with the health care team. A good volunteer needs to be well-organized and disciplined in his skills, but must also maintain a flexible attitude and tolerate ambiguity.

Jan Nick remarked on her nursing experience, "Flexibility is key to a successful visit...It broadened my perspective and has helped me understand the Indian people I meet here in the US. I was asked to do some things that I am not accustomed to doing...speaking in large groups, consulting with editorial boards, singing for church. They are so appreciative it makes you not afraid to attempt new things." Another volunteer has remarked, "No matter how much you plan for a volunteer experience, flexibility is the key. I only have to do the next thing -- I don't have to know how all of the pieces will fit together."

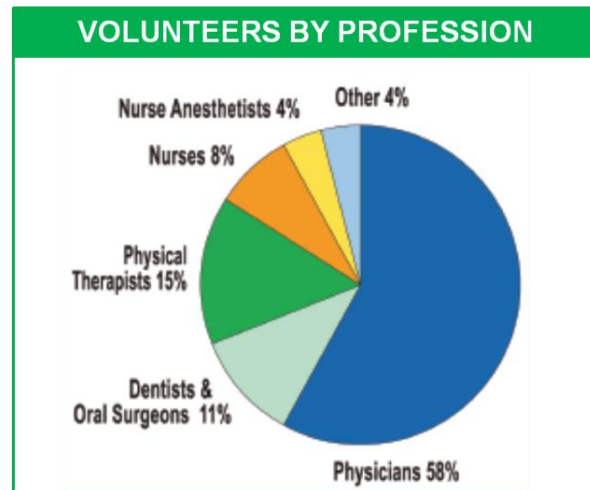
Patience is needed in different ways. Throughout most of the world, the pace of life is slower than in North America. Much time is spent on developing personal relationships, and listening to colleagues and patients can be an excellent way of learning about the culture and modeling behaviors. This can be frustrating to volunteers who have high expectations of what they hope to accomplish in a short-term assignment, but it is important to take the long-term view and recognize that taking time to understand the culture and the needs will impact the receptivity to changing attitudes and behaviors. Similarly, maintaining a cheerful, positive demeanor and persistently serving as a role model will effect sustainable change over time.

Physical therapist Kay Ahern stated, "I believe the success is not immediate, but in time there will be a person, a situation, a treatment that will make a difference; there will be that individual that 2 or 3 years later will take the ball (information, skill, knowledge) that you have been trying to give them. Like a light bulb turning on! Such a nice feeling to have someone report to you that you were able to make a difference eventually."

Volunteer Colleague **Role Model** Change Agent Champion
 Catalyst **Teacher** **What is a Volunteer?**
 Advisor Mentor Leader **Face of HVO** Friend
 Guest **Sounding board** Resource Inspiring Good listeners Patient
 Interpret across culture Flexible **Open minded** Let go
What makes an effective volunteer?
 Thoughtful Adaptable **Positive in demeanor** Prepared
 Innovative Build upon local knowledge Sensitive
 Transforming Creative **Trustworthy** Perceptive
 Provide sustainable change Fun Open to learning

Openness is a quality and attitude that will serve you well as a volunteer. You are entering a new culture; be open to its possibilities and its wisdom. Come prepared, having done some research on the culture, medical practices, and traditions. Be sensitive to the different nuances in the culture, particularly in terms of personal space, eye contact, touch, and proper attire. In some program sites, there are health care providers from a variety of cultures, so it is important to recognize such a diverse team and acknowledge that you are working across a lot of different cultural styles. Respecting and valuing diversity allows you to learn from your colleagues as well. By remaining open-minded, volunteers can appreciate what is culturally valuable, medically sound, and technologically feasible in order to build upon local knowledge rather than replace it.

Being open to the new culture also brings a sense of humility as volunteers recognize that they have much to learn from their colleagues, who are working under harsh conditions with limited resources. Asha Bajaj, a physical therapist, was surprised to see, "how unorthodox practical techniques were just as effective compared to all our 'evidence-based academic models'. The great familial support structure and their willingness to adapt was a revelation." Similarly, Dr. Nina Lightdale commented, "I learned that the very best medical care can be provided with limited resources if you are creative, work with a great team, and believe deeply in what you are doing." Indeed, many volunteers return home feeling they have learned more from the experience than they gave.



Innovativeness means learning to adjust to what facilities are available. Functioning in a situation where lab tests and x-rays are unavailable means enhancing your diagnostic skills and focusing on the patient's history and exam. Dr. Eric Hentzen felt his HVO experience "has definitely taught me new techniques and ways to do things clinically that I wouldn't have thought of otherwise. It has also shown me the capabilities of health care providers and patients when they don't have access to the technology or support we typically have at home." For many professionals, the experience, although somewhat disconcerting initially, serves to remind them of what originally drew them to health care.

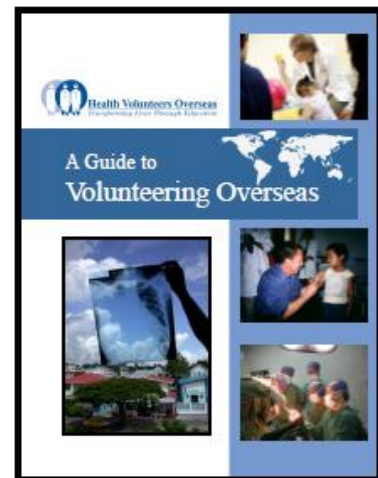
Integrity is a quality that transcends your visit. The program site hosts will have spent a lot of time and energy preparing for your visit and want to treat you as a special guest. At the same time, they are often short-staffed, work several jobs, and have the multiple demands on their time that you encounter at home. Professional integrity means that you are committed to providing the best care, with the resources available. You are willing to share your knowledge, yet remain open to technologically-appropriate solutions. You share a passion for your work and are dependable in your service. When a task is

understood, you take initiative and are willing to challenge yourself. You will be seen as an ambassador, representing HVO as an organization. On a personal level, you should maintain the same standard of behavior to which you hold yourself at home, respecting their culture but remaining true to your personal values.

Upon her return home, Dr. Emily Berry, an OB/Gyn oncologist, reported on her visit:

We are best suited to contribute to their knowledge so that THEY can best serve the women of Honduras. With this expectation, one can feel more satisfaction with what can be accomplished in one week. In the long run, I think the relationships established with residents and faculty are going to outlast any clinic or operating experience a volunteer had. I have been home 3 days and already have been consulted by the residents about the management of a patient with gestational trophoblastic disease. A one-week interaction can turn into a life-long alliance and relationship.

These traits of flexibility, patience, openness, innovativeness, and integrity are at the core of successful volunteers but they must also be prepared for an assignment. The more you understand the culture, the expectations of the site, and your own abilities, the smoother your experience will be. To prepare for a volunteer assignment, be sure to speak with the HVO recruiter to schedule a convenient timeframe at the most appropriate program site. Read [A Guide to Volunteering Overseas](#) (available in the HVO Marketplace), talk with the program director, and read trip reports and lectures that are available on HVO's *KnowNET*. Practice modeling behaviors here at home so it will feel natural when you arrive at your site, and prepare yourself for an experience that can be transforming.



PREPARING FOR AN HVO ASSIGNMENT

1. Visit the HVO web site www.hvousing.org to research programs in your speciality.
2. Call the HVO office (202) 296-0928 for scheduling information.
3. Read ***A Guide to Volunteering Overseas*** before you go.