



Health Volunteers Overseas

Improving Global Health Through Education



HIGHLY EFFECTIVE VOLUNTEERS

What combination of skills and personality makes for a highly effective international volunteer? Surprisingly, the personal characteristics of exceptional volunteers, in any discipline, are remarkably consistent: people who are patient, flexible, adaptable, innovative and open to new experiences and ideas are typically the most successful and satisfied volunteers.

“An outstanding HVO volunteer is a combination of skilled health care provider/educator, ambassador, and adventurer,” said David Frost, DDS, MS, Chair of HVO’s Board of Directors.

“A volunteer has to be willing to share knowledge and skills in his/her area of expertise on many levels, with specialty peers, interested support staff and patients both in the treatment of routine and complex cases as well as the teaching of techniques from basic to cutting edge. The best volunteers are adventurers – people willing to accept a challenge, something out of the ordinary, which will ultimately enrich themselves and others.”

Increasingly, the global community is recognizing both the economic and social value of promoting volunteerism. The United Nations (UN) declared 2001 the International Year of Volunteers and actively promotes research and events that increase the role and effectiveness of international volunteers. In a recent speech, Ad de Raad, Executive Coordinator of the UN’s Volunteer Programme, underscored the “unifying effects of volunteerism in drawing together key actors – non-governmental organizations, governments, the private sector, academia and the media – in the concerted effort to provide support and relief to those in need...Volunteerism,” said de Raad, “is the ‘glue’ that holds society together.”¹



Why Volunteer Overseas?

“People volunteer for both selfish and altruistic reasons – they want to learn, grow, have an adventure, and they also want to help others,” said *Transitions Abroad Magazine* editor Zahara Heckscher.²

Upon returning from overseas assignments, HVO volunteers report a great sense of satisfaction from “giving back” and doing their part to ensure quality health care in HVO’s targeted communities. Researchers at the UK-based Institute for Volunteer Research agree. “Volunteering is empowering to individuals, giving them the confidence and the skills to change their environment and themselves.”³



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Volunteering through HVO or another international organization is the quintessential immersion experience. It's a great way to see the world, to learn new languages, to sample life in other cultures and, in the case of HVO volunteers, to study different beliefs concerning health, illness and disability. By traveling out of our familiar surroundings, we are "jerked out of our self-focused world."⁴ We are forced to embrace, wrote an HVO volunteer, "a complete paradigm shift"⁵ that ultimately enriches us both personally and professionally.

HVO volunteers report that their own knowledge and skills are honed and enhanced through teaching others. "The wonderful thing about a good mentoring relationship is that it is always a reciprocal relationship. Knowledge transfers both ways..."⁶ affirmed Mary Merrill in *Mentoring the New Faces of Leadership*. Solo practitioners, in particular, have a unique opportunity to gain exposure to a wider range of pathologies than they normally see. Beth Dollinger, MD, volunteered in Phnom Penh, Cambodia at the Sihanouk Hospital Center of Hope. She wrote: "Going to Cambodia was the

most difficult thing I have ever done. I found it a truly remarkable experience and I believe I learned far more than I was able to teach."

Perhaps the best reason to volunteer is that your skills and knowledge are needed. You can make a difference in the lives of others. Wherever they work, HVO volunteers help to develop more efficient and targeted therapies, save lives, and improve the quality of life for others.

Who Makes a Good Volunteer?

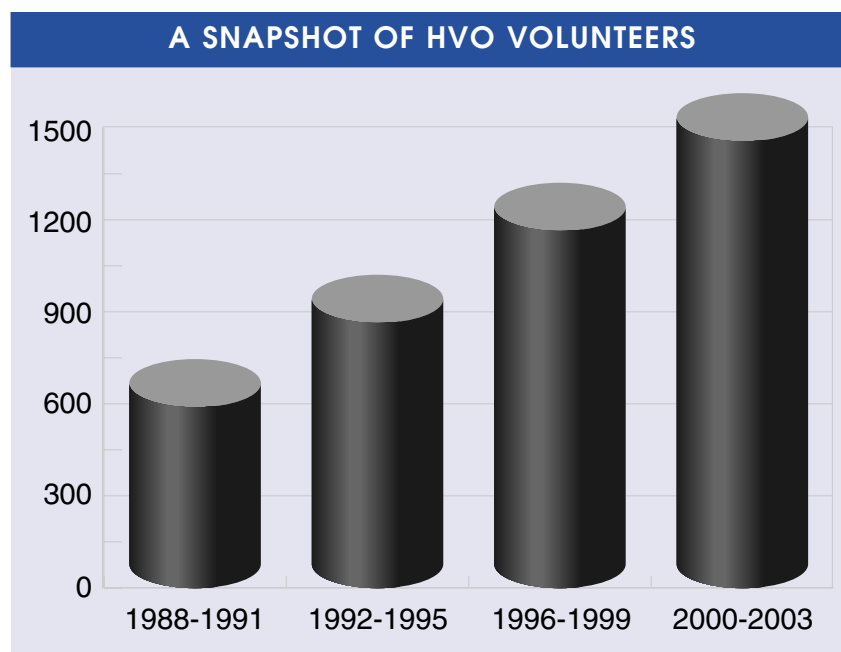
In much of the research focused on successful volunteers, a core set of personal traits is identified as essential. Among those qualities most often cited are flexibility or adaptability, patience, openness, innovativeness and integrity. Of course the best volunteers are not only those who possess these innate qualities, but also those who are well prepared for their assignments. Being an effective volunteer requires lots of preparation and is, in fact, hard work as well as being an exciting and wonderful opportunity to travel and see the world.⁷

Flexibility: HVO has a detailed pre-departure briefing program which includes an orientation packet as well as regular communication with



Through a generous grant from the J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott Foundation, HVO was able to revise and reprint A Guide to Volunteering Overseas.

Over the years, interest in volunteering overseas with HVO has grown steadily amongst health professionals dedicated to sharing their knowledge and skills with others.



HVO staff, Program Directors, on-site coordinators and previous volunteers. Yet, despite these excellent communication tools, unforeseen circumstances and situations routinely arise in the developing country setting. Volunteers who are flexible are able to adapt to whatever realities present themselves – days without electricity, sudden shortages of vital medical supplies, cultural differences and scheduling difficulties.

“Plans are made as activities evolve and sometimes it feels frustrating when you arrive to find out the day’s been turned topsy-turvy and the playing field is somewhere else,” wrote HVO volunteer Diane Williams, PT. “Or that preparations that you made the week before aren’t appropriate for what you will be providing to the staff and students this week as things ‘have changed.’” As another volunteer expressed: “Being a good volunteer is about doing what is necessary.”⁸

Patience: International volunteers need patience. The pace of life tends to be slower in most regions of the world than in North America and concepts of time and punctuality can differ greatly. This can be frustrating to volunteers who have very high expectations of what they hope to accomplish during their short-term assignments. Many successful HVO volunteers report taking a period of time at the beginning of their assignments to observe, ask questions and better understand the chal-

lenges facing local communities. By avoiding the tendency to force an agenda, volunteers find themselves more at ease with their mentor/teacher role and better able to effect lasting changes in the quality of health care.

Openness: Demonstrating respect for people and tolerance for other ways of doing things are important attributes in the cross-cultural environment presented by HVO’s programs. As Williams expressed: “I let go of many ‘shoulds’ and many, many assumptions during my time there and can only hope that one day I’ll have the opportunity to return some of the valuable experience that was gained there.” 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.

Innovativeness: For many North American health professionals, functioning in a developing country where lab tests and x-rays are unavailable means enhancing their diagnostic skills or: “the old fashioned art of the history and clinical examination”⁹ as HVO volunteer Michael Gross, MD, described it. “Resources are limited and problems are endless, so a fair amount of wisdom is needed to couple what’s possible with what’s practical,” added Gross.

Integrity: Merrill describes this essential quality as a “combination of moral soundness and competence.”¹⁰ HVO volunteers have an obligation to themselves and their colleagues,



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both here and abroad, to act with integrity while on assignment. Professional integrity includes being a reliable and accountable volunteer. Personal integrity means maintaining the same standard of behavior to which you hold yourself at home.

Following an assignment in Siem Reap, Cambodia, David Charnesky, CRNA, offered this advice: “Common sense, a good attitude, and a smile will get you a long way.”¹¹ Besides the personal traits discussed here, there is much that volunteers can do to be effective at their training site. A volunteer who is prepared, both personally and professionally, is far more likely to be successful in his volunteer assignment. (See the box below.)

Preparing Yourself: Cultural Awareness

Successful and satisfied volunteers have a strong sense not only of what they hope to give but also of what they hope to gain from the experience. “The best volunteers tend to be those with the most clarity in their personal goals...Be honest with [yourself] and realistic with others.”¹²

Cultural Competence: A culturally competent volunteer provides health care education and services that are respectful of and responsive to the cultural and linguistic needs of his/her colleagues and patients. Both culture and language influence health, healing and wellness belief systems; how illness, disease and their causes are perceived by local providers and patients; and the behavior of both local providers and patients.¹³

The culturally competent volunteer is aware of his/her own views and biases and has taken the time to gain knowledge of other cultures. Cultural competency is not just knowing what people from other cultures do but why. In

many countries, for example, health professionals may not earn enough money to support their families. They may hold a second or even third job to make ends meet, resulting in scheduling conflicts, fatigue or tardiness. By understanding local work conditions, HVO volunteers will be prepared to prioritize training objectives and to teach what can realistically be learned. Cultural competency is also important as HVO volunteers interact with local care providers, patients and patients’ families in finding appropriate treatments.

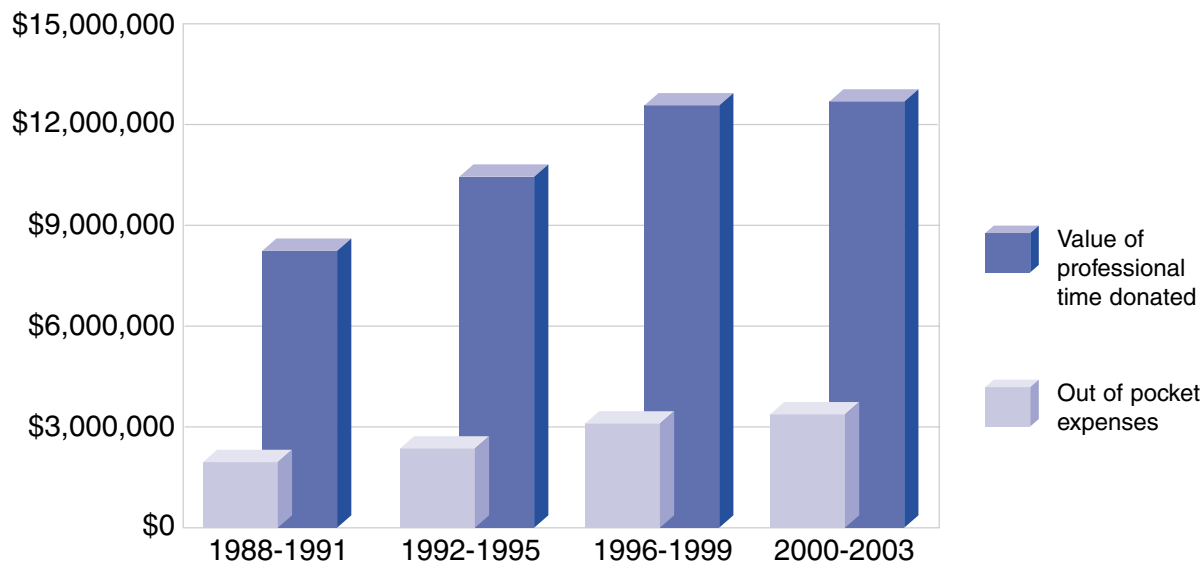
There are many examples of cross-cultural differences experienced by HVO volunteers. Among those found to be most important and to have the greatest impact on the experiences of the volunteer and his/her students are: different concepts of space and time; different protocols in the hospital or clinic; environments where a lack of cleanliness and overcrowding are common; different belief systems about health and illness; different lifestyles: how and where people sit, sleep, eat, dress, and go to the bathroom; and, different teaching and learning styles. An awareness of these distinctions help volunteers to bridge the cultural gap with their students and to focus on their shared commitment to improving health care and alleviating suffering.

Communication Skills: Good listening skills are invaluable to a productive volunteer experience. When you first arrive at your site, listen closely and observe others to develop an understanding of communication patterns, greetings, hierarchy and protocol. Some helpful communication techniques include asking open-ended questions and paraphrasing the words of others. You should also be aware of the importance of nonverbal communication, which is largely unconscious, spontaneous and culturally determined.

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.

FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF HVO VOLUNTEERS



Culture Shock: Culture shock is the term to describe the more pronounced reactions to the psychological disorientation most people experience when they move into a culture markedly different from their own. Signs of culture shock include: homesickness, withdrawal, irritability, stereotyping and hostility toward host nationals, loss of ability to work effectively and physical ailments. Being a culturally competent volunteer is perhaps the best way to combat cultural shock. Volunteers who overcome their culture shock learn, adapt and develop new appreciations for many things. In his trip report, Charnesky wrote, “Generally, if a situation feels frustrating to you, take a step back and a couple of minutes to regroup your thoughts before proceeding...My trip opened up a new area of enjoyment in travel, literature, food and people. Diversity is good!”

Impediments to Volunteering

There are a range of psychological and practical barriers to volunteering. First and foremost, volunteers lack accurate and comprehensive information about where, how and with whom to volunteer. Assess your interests wisely and honestly to make sure there is a fit between your goals and HVO’s teaching and training mission.

Finding the “Right Time”: According to HVO Executive Director, Nancy A. Kelly, MHS, “there is no right time to volunteer, but there are wrong times.” Being a good volunteer entails a certain degree of stability, so opting for an assignment following any kind of a personal or professional crisis is never a good idea. Finding the “right time” is a challenge for most North American health care professionals who must often balance career and family with the exciting opportunity to travel abroad. At selected HVO sites, spouses and/or children can accompany the volunteer. HVO recognizes that health care providers make a serious financial, personal and professional commitment in volunteering overseas. The costs of volunteering through HVO are tax-deductible and involve international travel and living expenses, which average \$2,500 per trip.

Lack of Confidence: Many potential volunteers lack confidence in their ability to contribute, particularly in an unfamiliar environment. Yet, consider these facts: in the least developed countries, \$11 is spent on health per person annually; nearly half of the world’s population does not have access to basic health care services; and in chronically underfunded educational systems, health care providers rarely have the opportunity to update their knowledge and skills.



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In HVO's programs, the role of the volunteer is defined by the needs of the training site and in pre-departure briefing materials. Volunteers are also oriented by HVO staff, Program Directors, previous volunteers and on-site coordinators. Extensive preparation makes HVO volunteers uniquely placed to make a difference in the health and lives of others. The results at HVO's training sites demonstrate the contributions of our volunteers: fewer infections, better pain management, more effective therapies, improved surgical results, more appropriate clinical interventions, fewer avoidable deaths and, ultimately, better quality of life.

Fears for Personal Health and Safety: "Volunteer but volunteer wisely," writes Zahara Heckscher. "But don't let fear dissuade you from volunteering."¹⁴ Many Americans are concerned about terrorism yet one of the greatest danger to the health of expatriates in developing countries is trauma related to motor vehicle accidents.¹⁵ Finding out as much as you can about health and safety concerns in the country of your assignment will help to allay your fears.

HVO's orientation materials include country and site-specific information. HVO staff receive regular U.S. State Department updates concerning security conditions in all countries where we work. In addition to orienting volunteers in the placement process, on-site personnel help with logistical arrangements in-country, including airport pick-up, local transportation, and assistance with housing. Solo travel is often of particular concern to women. Cross-cultural experts agree that women should be especially aware of local customs and stereotypes of western females. Efforts to dress and behave appropriately in keeping with local norms will help to deflect unwanted attention and make for a more rewarding volunteer experience.

The Outstanding Volunteer Experience

The benefits of an outstanding HVO volunteer experience are potentially transforming, resulting in a renewed sense of professional purpose as well as a deeply enriching personal experience that is savored long into the future. Williams summed up her experience with these words: "I would say that, unequivocally, my experiences in Bhutan were some of the most powerful and pivotal insights and experiences that have occurred in my 50 [years] plus action-packed life."

Are you ready for the challenge of an international volunteer assignment? Will you make a difference in the lives of others by sharing your skills with other health care providers? HVO is waiting to hear from you. ■

RESOURCE LIST

1. <http://www.hvousa.org> Look under Volunteer Toolkit.
2. ***A Guide to Volunteering Overseas.***
3. Your personalized HVO Orientation packet.
4. HVO's On-Line Bookstore/Amazon.com (<http://www.hvousa.org>):
 - Fadiman, Anne. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York, 1997.
 - Kohls, L. Robert. *Survival Kit for Overseas Living*. Intercultural Press, Yarmouth, Maine, 2001.
5. Lonely Planet Guide Books: available at <http://www.lonelyplanet.com>
6. Other web sites:
 - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <http://www.cdc.org>
 - US State Department: <http://www.state.gov/travel/>
 - Intercultural Press: <http://www.intercultural.org>

HVO PROGRAM SITES



ENDNOTES

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3. Information on the Institute for Volunteer Research available at <http://www.ivr.org.uk/>
4. Green, Sarah. "Volunteerism at Home: Keeping the Spirit of an Overseas Experience Alive". *Transitions Abroad Magazine September/October 2002*. Available at <http://www.transitionsabroad.com/publications/magazine/0209/green.shtml>
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8. Cridland, Lee, Andean Information Center. Quoted by: Collins, Joseph and Wendt, Luke. "Volunteering Overseas: What it Takes to Be a Highly Effective Volunteer". *Transitions Abroad Magazine September/October 2003*. Available at http://www.transitionsabroad.com/publications/magazine/0309/volunteeringoverseas_whatitakes.shtml
9. Michael Gross, MD, OO Ethiopia volunteer, November 2003.
10. Merrill.
11. David Charnesky, CRNA, NAO Cambodia volunteer, July 2004.
12. Heckscher.
13. Center for Linguistic and Cultural Competence in Health Care. Available at <http://www.omhrc.gov/cultural>
14. Heckscher.
15. Ryan ET, Kain K. Health Advice and Immunizations for Travelers. *NEJM* 2000; 342: 1716- 1725.