

Making short-term international medical volunteer placements work: a qualitative study.

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Abstract

BACKGROUND:

International medical volunteering has grown in recent decades. It has the potential to benefit and harm the volunteer and host countries; but there is a paucity of literature on the impacts of international medical volunteering and a need to find ways to optimise the benefits of such placements.

AIM:

In this study, one example of international medical volunteering was examined involving British GPs on short-term placements in Nepal. The intention was to explore the expectations and experiences of the local health workers, volunteers, and host organisation to try and understand what makes volunteer placements work.

DESIGN:

Qualitative study of key informant interviews.

SETTING:

Stakeholders of a short-term international medical volunteer (IMV) placement programme in Nepal.

METHOD:

Key informant interviews were carried out via face-to-face or telephone/internet interviews with five previous volunteers, three representatives from a non-governmental organisation providing placements, and five local health workers in Nepal who had had contact with the IMVs. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using standard thematic framework approaches.

RESULTS:

All the stakeholders had their own specific motives for participating in the IMV programme. The relationship between volunteers and the Nepalese health workers was complex and characterised by discrepant and occasionally unrealistic expectations. Managing these different expectations was challenging.

CONCLUSION:

Contextual issues and cultural differences are important considerations in medical volunteer programmes, and this study highlights the importance of robust preparation pre-placement for the volunteer and host to ensure positive outcomes.

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KEYWORDS:

international educational exchange; medical tourism; volunteerism

PMID: 24868070 [PubMed - in process] PMCID: PMC4032015 [Available on 2015/6/1]