

# VOLUNTEERING ETHICALLY – TIPS FOR SELECTING AN ELECTIVE PROJECT ABROAD

By Mhairi Young



**V**olunteering abroad is a great way of putting your dental skills to good use. However, the number of charities and organisations offering opportunities for dental volunteers is overwhelming. After years of studying, money is tight and free time is precious – how do you decide which organisation to work with?

Here are some of the lessons Mhairi – who has taken part in volunteer projects in Malawi, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Benin and India – learned along the way which you might want to consider when selecting a project.

## Type of dental treatment

Some projects will allow you to provide basic restorations and dentures whereas others will be limited to extractions. There are opportunities to work in general practice, hospital settings, teaching programmes and/or field work.

I have provided restorations in developing countries however as with all dental treatment this is not guaranteed to be successful. Often, volunteer dentist roles are not filled all year round. This means that patients may not have the option to receive follow-up care if a restoration was to fall out or pulpitis was to develop.

## Equipment

Some projects benefit from electricity and running water, others are more basic.

I have worked on projects where Western-style dental chairs and sterilisation facilities were available. I have also worked on

projects where instruments were decontaminated using pressure cookers. As re-assuring as it is to recognise equipment from the Western world, be mindful that the shiny equipment is unlikely to be able to be maintained or repaired in a developing country therefore using locally available alternatives may be required.

## Teaching

Your elective period is short and there's only so many extractions that can be done in one day. Trust me – I've had the calluses to prove it!

There's an old proverb *'give a man a fish and you'll feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you've fed him for a lifetime.'* Projects which involve teaching local people leave behind skills which can be used to provide dental care in the future when you're back in the UK. It's helping others to help themselves.

## Money

Some projects are expensive! Ethical organisations should be open and honest about where your money goes. Some project costs include a donation which goes directly to charity however some projects are profit-making. If this information isn't made clear, it can be requested.

## Religion

Some organisations operating in developing countries have a religious background.

I have worked with a charity where songs and prayers were compulsory before the dental clinic would commence and faith-based conversations were common during breakfast, whilst doing your washing and even whilst exercising. Although some religious organisations may accept non-believers, be sure this is a culture you are willing to embrace in the short-term.

## Language

Dentistry relies upon clear communication with your patient. Gesturing and body language will only get you so far. If English is not a widely spoken language in your selected country, will a translator with a reasonable grasp of English be available?

With careful planning, your elective is a great opportunity to add real value to underserved communities. Do your research and ask questions. Find out what a typical day is like and get in touch with previous volunteers. Get involved in projects that respect the countries and people that they serve and are sustainable and transparent.

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