

CHAPTER 1

Getting started

'Travel plans are like honey dripping down toward your lips—sweet anticipation.'

KURT VONNEGUT

'I can't think of anything that excites a greater sense of childlike wonder than to be in a country where you are ignorant of almost everything.'

BILL BRYSON

Planning for your placement should not be a drag. Everything you do in preparation, right up until you leave, should be like appetisers leading up to a feast. Enjoy it, savour it! Once you depart, travel with an open mind and a warm heart. An intercultural placement is guaranteed to change your life. The memories will last you a lifetime, and you will never look through the same eyes again.

So many choices!

There is a huge variety of placement opportunities. They may be for a few weeks, or a whole year. They may involve students, less-experienced professionals or experienced sub-specialists. They may be in a remote village in Africa, the slums of a city in India, or an Aboriginal community in Australia. They may be part of study or work, or a holiday extra. They may be paid or voluntary. They may be with a major hospital, a village clinic or with a research group. They may involve diving, mountain climbing, bush-walking or flying. You may work a few hours a day, or all night as well.

TIP

Finding information

Preparation will require researching far and wide. Some valuable information can be very difficult to find. Look up books, surf the Internet, contact travel editors, visit the library and check out tourist agencies. Most importantly, talk to those who have been before.

TIP

Electives and beyond

While many universities offer an elective period for students, this is not the only way you can undertake an intercultural placement. Many students take the opportunity during holidays to participate in a placement. Don't rule out deferring for a year to go on a placement—this will also give you more time to save up before hitting the skies!

Your placement will be a highlight of your undergraduate life—an experience that can benefit not only yourself but also the communities in which you work.

1. **Consider your motives.** Why are you going and what do you want to achieve? Set realistic and achievable goals.
2. **Research thoroughly.** Talk to students, professionals and anyone else who has travelled to the region.
3. **Correspond with your hosts.** Ask many questions to get the best possible picture of what you'll encounter.
4. **Get started early.** Replies from overseas take weeks, and then there is the medical and legal jungle of leaving Australia. Don't leave it all until the last minute!
5. **Smile and enjoy!** No one can be so prepared that his or her placement proceeds without a hitch—indeed half the fun is meeting the challenges head on.

TIP

Placements can be a hugely rewarding experience for all involved, but there will also be sacrifices to make. If you take only one thing out of this handbook let it be this message:

Recognise and appreciate your coworkers as skilled and competent practitioners. Don't be a lone ranger! Work together, laugh together and, when necessary, cry together.

Placement essentials***Who is involved?***

Every placement involves not only you, but also the host community and the host health care team. Even during your planning it is important to remember that your placement has an impact on more people than just you. Everything you do will influence the team you are working with and the community you have entered.

What is involved?

Intercultural placements essentially involve you entering a community very different from your own to live, work and become part of the community. You will be contributing not only your skills, but also part of yourself. You will gain new skills while experiencing a host of cultural and social differences. In all, it will be the relationships made along the way that will leave the biggest impression—on you and on your hosts. Longer placements will provide greater opportunities to develop these relationships, but even a few weeks can be immensely rewarding.

The activities you take part in each day will vary greatly. Be sure to communicate effectively with your hosts from the start. The last thing you want is to be pulling in a different direction from that of your hosts.

CASE STUDY 1

Dr Jane Franklin is a second year doctor. She is keen to spend a year overseas, and is trying to work out what would suit her best.

Questions

- Who could Jane talk to about her placement? What questions could she ask?
- What parts of your background (education, family, culture etc.) impact on your expectations?

Conclusion

Jane contacted a number of non-government organisations (NGOs) and individual hospitals in her search for a placement. She also talked to a surgeon who had spent time in Ethiopia at a fistula hospital. This sounded most appealing to Jane—it was remote, but offered high-quality gynaecological services to village women.

After contacting the hospital, Jane found that they had an opportunity for a volunteer doctor. Although they had been looking for someone more experienced, Jane's enthusiasm won them over. As they provided living expenses, Jane was able to commit for the full year and absolutely loved it.

Since returning to Australia, Jane has entered surgical school, and has plans to return to Ethiopia in the next few years.

Jane's advice

The best advice is first-hand, from people who have worked there before. Pursue your interests and let them know how enthusiastic you are. Really think about what sort of a placement would suit you best—it's no good going to Antarctica if you hate the cold!

Where can I go?

Placements are generally undertaken in a community with a different cultural outlook from your own. Usually these are needy communities in the developing world, such as throughout Asia, Africa, South America, Pacific Islands and the Indian subcontinent. Available resources will be limited and this will impact on every part of practice.

Placements may also be in needy communities within developed countries (e.g. Aboriginal Australians), or even in relatively privileged communities within developed countries (e.g. UK and USA). Resources in these places will be much more readily available.

How to set up a placement

Where do I start?

It is always daunting when you start to set up your placement. There are so many options, how do you know which is right for you? Working through Chapter 2: 'Personal' will help you decide which will suit you best. Keep your eyes and ears open for opportunities but don't commit too quickly.

There are two main ways you can organise a placement:

- through an established organisation; or
- through individual contacts.

Both have their benefits and downfalls, and we'll look at a few of these. Think about what would suit you best.

Established organisations

These include mission groups, other NGOs and programs such as the Youth Ambassador program (an Australian Government initiative). There is huge variation between organisations and the programs they offer. Some do all the organisational work for you; others expect you to do most of it yourself. Some have very strict programs for you to join;

others allow more flexibility. They will probably have taken people on placement before, which means there may be returnees you can talk to in preparation. They should also have access to good travel deals and plenty of extra information. However, it may also mean there are expectations of you based on the organisation's experiences with past volunteers.

There are a number of Health and Development job networks available online. See the resources at the end of this chapter.

Individual contacts

These include both individuals (expatriates and nationals) on location and individual health care institutions. Your contact may be a medical or nursing staff member of an established hospital, a member of the hospital management, a community health worker or a local community leader. You can also speak to professionals and students who have worked or done an elective placement overseas.

Seeking out a placement through individual contacts is a riskier option than going through an established program. They will probably have had very limited experience with taking people on placement, but this is not necessarily a bad thing. Many people would say it is by far the best option, as you'll get to design your placement to suit you—and for the adventurers among us, what a thrill to go where none have been before!

Placement features



There are many different features to consider when choosing or designing a placement. Some will be important to you, some will not really matter—nevertheless, it is important to think about them all briefly. Here are some questions to get you started.

Where?

- Where in the world interests you? Do you have any connections with a country already (e.g. language, culture, family)? Do you want to go to a highly developed country or a less-developed country?
- Do you want to join a big tertiary hospital, or would you prefer a village placement with less technical support?

Who?

- Who do you wish to travel with? Would you like other volunteers to join you on the journey, or will you 'go it alone'? Could you form a group to apply, prepare, fundraise and travel together?
- Who do you wish to work with over there? Would you like the support of other volunteers alongside you? Would you prefer working with other westerners or solely with the nationals?
- Would you like to be part of a Christian or religious mission, or would you prefer a secular organisation? Would you consider going through a government program?

What type of work?

- What sort of work do you want to do? Are you interested in a particular field of medicine? How involved do you want to be?
- Can you find funding for your own placement?

Sociocultural conditions

- How far out of your comfort zone can you go? What western comforts will you still need (e.g. hot water, electricity, bathroom, washing machine)?
- Are there any cultural intricacies you know you couldn't handle? Are any of your beliefs or ideals incompatible with certain work or experiences?

CASE STUDY 2

Stuart Dent is a fifth year medical student who is planning an overseas elective next year. He has found out about a few places by speaking with other students and doctors. Among these is a clinic in Utopia.

The clinic has not taken students before, but a second year graduate spent time there last year. Stu sends off a letter. The head doctor, Dr Devine, responds very positively to his inquiries, and is keen to pursue the options.

Questions

- What things should Stu inquire about in his next letter?
- How can Stu explain the purpose of an elective placement to his prospective hosts?
- What are realistic expectations of the host medical team in regard to an elective placement?

Conclusion

Stu spent time nutting out what was important to him for his placement. He then sent off a stack of questions to Dr Devine. Dr Devine was impressed with his enthusiasm and provided lots of information that helped Stu make up his mind. Stu dusted off his CV, wrote an application letter, and sent them in to the Celestial Medical Clinic. His application was successful, and he is now preparing to head off in six months time.

Stu's advice

Look around at all the options before applying. Also, ask all your questions—even if they seem stupid. You won't know if you don't ask, and the last thing you want is a rude surprise when you arrive!

Applying for a placement

The key to securing a good placement is to get in early! Start scouting out opportunities years before you plan to go. Some are booked out over a year in advance (e.g. Royal Flying Doctors). Applying for a placement involves:

- Initial inquiries—start now!
- Expressions of interest—as soon as a possibility materialises.
- Application letter—6–12 months in advance.

Initial inquiries

As you speak to other volunteers and look around for opportunities you will find some that interest you and others that bore you. Don't wait until the perfect opportunity arises—start checking out the options and send some letters. They shouldn't be detailed—all you need to know at this stage is whether or not a placement is a possibility.

Some places may have never taken people on placement before—particularly in the case of student electives. If it is a new concept to them, they may need more information regarding what you are actually looking for. Those who have taken volunteers in the past will have had mixed experiences, so don't just assume they will be keen to participate again. Hosting someone is a big commitment, especially for small clinics, and can be a burden year after year.

Expressions of interest

Once you have received a few positive replies, you can begin narrowing down your options and following up on those you are interested in. When composing follow-up letters, make it clear you are interested in finding out more about undertaking a placement with them. Briefly explain who you are, the approximate dates of your placement and what you are interested in doing. Finally, ask any questions that will help you decide which opportunity to take up.