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T. Bharucha, A. Traianou, M. Keniger, G. Chisholm, G. Lewis, J. Roland, M. Stark, C.S. Brown

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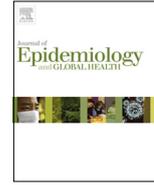
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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Volunteering to improve health worldwide. Current trends in Out of Programme Experience/Training in the UK 2014



T. Bharucha ^{a,b,*}, A. Traianou ^b, M. Keniger ^b, G. Chisholm ^c, G. Lewis ^b,
J. Roland ^d, M. Stark ^e, C.S. Brown ^{b,d}

^a London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, United Kingdom

^b Alma Mata Global Health Graduates' Network

^c THET (Tropical Health and Education Trust), United Kingdom

^d All Party Parliamentary Group on Global Health, United Kingdom

^e Cross-Government Project on Overseas Volunteering, United Kingdom

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Voluntary partnerships and volunteering schemes have a key role in improving health worldwide, bringing mutual benefits to both home and host countries [1,2]. In the United Kingdom, there has been an increasing interest in encouraging trainees to take overseas placements. These periods out of specialist training are termed 'Out of Programme Experience/Training' (OOPE/T), and require careful negotiation within the career path. OOPE/T involves formal approval from overseeing bodies and needs to be relevant to training pathways [3].

Official statements by royal medical and specialist colleges and regulatory bodies support expansion of opportunities and access. However, anecdotal reports and limited published data suggest trainee's expectations of challenges in gaining OOPE/T approval and uncertainties regarding application processes remain, with decisions largely due to local approval by post-graduate training authorities [4,5].

A cross-sectional survey of colleges within the UK was conducted to identify how many speciality trainees are currently registered, how many they know are currently taking overseas OOPE/T and, where recorded, in which countries and for what duration (Table 1).

The findings suggest that national recording of trainees taking overseas OOPE/T by colleges is poor and, where available, country of destination is often not recorded. Furthermore, limited numbers of trainees are availing themselves of the opportunities to take overseas OOPE/T, e.g., less than half of one percent of physician trainees, though others may take research time overseas.

OOPE/T should be well-devised, appropriately structured, and tailored to trainee and host country needs. The knowledge of the benefits received, difficulties encountered, and ability to improve experiences for future trainees will only come from recording data and reviewing the same. To best utilize trainees for the good of global health, more robust data are needed. To this end, it is recommended to urge colleges: (1) to gather data

* Corresponding author at: London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, United Kingdom.

E-mail address: t.bharucha@doctors.org.uk (T. Bharucha).

Table 1 Number of trainees on OOPE/T by Royal or Specialist College.

College	Total number of trainees	OOPE/T	Countries	Median duration
College of Emergency Medicine	512	12	Australia (7) Unknown/Military (5)	6 months
Royal College of Anaesthetists	5862	x	x	x
Royal College of General Practitioners	13,402	x	x	x
Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists	1892	x	x	x
Royal College of Ophthalmologists	700	5	India (1) Australia (1)	21 months
Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health	5000	x	x	x
Royal College of Physicians	6669	32	x	x
Royal College of Psychiatry	3401	6	Australia (3) Ecuador (1) Ghana (1) Zimbabwe (1)	12 months
Royal College of Radiologists	1613	18	Australia (4) Canada (9) India (2) Ireland (1) USA (2)	x
Royal College of Surgeons	3909	57	Australia Canada USA	x

x = Data currently not recorded/accessible by the college.

on international activity to help remove perceived barriers to engagement; (2) to coordinate cross-college international activity to better meet host country needs; and (3) to gather evidence on competencies gained by trainees whilst on OOPE/T to demonstrate benefits to the National Health Service (NHS). Full benefits of volunteering will only be realized when they are adequately supported, with professional and systematic approaches [1].

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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