

General Comments and Advice on working or volunteering overseas

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Substantial numbers of veterinary graduates – the majority, but not all, younger members of the profession – express an interest in working overseas as a “volunteer”; that is, on an unpaid basis or a modest salary. Such postings can last for only a few weeks or extend for several years. This introductory article, part of a series produced by the British Veterinary Association (BVA) Overseas Group, is intended to provide some basic information and guidance to those who are interested in this sort of work. The various Annexes offer more specific advice about different parts of the world and types of activity.

1. Do your homework! Before considering embarking on a post overseas:

- Speak to someone who has done similar work.
- Check on the credentials of the organisation with which you want to serve.
- Familiarise yourself with the country where the work is to be done, including its cultural traditions and the languages(s) spoken.
- Ascertain whether you are mentally and physically fit for the responsibilities and lifestyle involved, including exposure to natural and human-induced hazards.

The BVA Overseas Group can usually put you in touch with someone who has served as a volunteer and, even if this has not been with your organisation or in the country in which you intend to work, such exposure is invaluable. Information about organisations is usually available on their websites but try and get an independent assessment also. Advice on different countries, their visa and other requirements, can be obtained from the relevant Embassy, or (for Commonwealth countries) the High Commission in London. Also consult travel guides and the web.

2. Prepare yourself well. There is a personal and a professional side to this.

The personal side means ensuring that you have the right clothing and other items for your time overseas. Remember to check the cultural, especially religious, sensitivities of the region. What may be acceptable clothing in a South American country may be considered improper in North Africa or the Far East.

Attention to health is also largely a personal matter. Check which vaccinations are considered advisable or mandatory for the country in which you will be working and be sure to have the full course of immunisation. Keep a note of all vaccines and medication that you receive and ensure that a photocopy of such documents is stored safely elsewhere. Be sure that you are adequately insured for medical or other emergencies – or be prepared to spend a large sum of money if things go wrong and, for example, you need medical evacuation.

The professional aspect concerns preparation to do your work adequately. You may need special equipment (including, perhaps, a computer that is portable and battery-operated) or require some training or refresher course in tropical diseases. Seek advice from those with experience of the project, the country or the subject matter.

3. Be courteous when naming - or referring to - people. Be sure to record the full name of local people with whom you work. Ask them to write down their names themselves so as to ensure that the words are spelt correctly.

It is quite remarkable and disturbing how often reports of projects, especially those carried out in Africa, give only a first name for members of local staff, presumably because the author of the report was unable to spell or to pronounce the person's full name.

Sometimes in the same document British personnel are referred to by their full name and may be afforded a title (Mrs, Dr, etc).

In addition to having a slightly condescending (colonial?) touch, referring to a local person only by first name is discourteous and does him/her an injustice. Usually the person's full name reflects his/her national and ethnic origin, religion and ancestry; it is therefore important socially and culturally.

It should also be remembered that giving only a first name to an overseas veterinary graduate, especially without a title (most overseas vets are called "doctor"), may be perceived as doubly discourteous. This is because it fails to recognise the training and title that that person has worked so hard to achieve.

4. Make sure that you are legal. Obtain the correct visas or other documents that permit you to enter, stay in and work in the country of your destination. Be sure to register as a veterinary surgeon, if this is a requirement in the country where you will be working. Remember that the authorities may require proof of your status in the UK; take photocopies of certificates and consider having them authenticated by a Notary Public. Ask the RCVS if they will issue you with a certificate or letter saying that you are qualified as a veterinary surgeon in the UK and are in good standing.

You may need other permits also – for example, from the relevant government department if you intend to work with wildlife. Do not contemplate taking out of your host country specimens, including plants or derivatives (even tiny diagnostic samples), until you have the correct authorisation.

Be very careful about carrying veterinary medicines or instruments that may appear dangerous until you are familiar with the requirements or restrictions of any country that you are visiting.

5. When you embark overseas for your project, ensure that you leave contact details with appropriate people in Britain. Consider joining and staying in touch with the BVA Overseas Group. On arrival in your host country, contact the British Embassy or High Commission and register with them; keep them informed of your movements if you travel in-country or if you take a holiday elsewhere. Have a note of their address, 'phone number

and e-mail details to hand so that if an emergency occurs (eg civil unrest) you can easily contact them.

When in your post, keep in touch with the world outside by, for example, listening to the BBC World Service on short-wave radio (do not rely on computer access to this or other international broadcasting networks).

6. Do not be despondent if you find your posting difficult at first. This is not unusual. Differences in culture, climate and working conditions can take time to assimilate. Ensure that you have friends and colleagues from different backgrounds with whom you can discuss problems. Take full advantage of any local support groups. Involve yourself as much as possible in the country and have a diversity of friends. Nurture interests such as reading, writing a diary, learning a local language, photography, study of natural history etc as these can help to fill lonely moments. Keep in touch with family and friends by correspondence or e-mail.

7. Contribute as much as you can to the host country, even if this is not related specifically to your work, and try to keep in touch with local people even when you have left. Remember to send letters of thanks, reports and photographs.

8. Share your experiences (good and bad) when you return to Britain. Be prepared to advise and help others who are interested in undertaking a similar project or visit. Bear in mind that most people who work overseas find it rewarding and stimulating – even if it takes time after one's return to recognise the benefits.

Quite apart from any professional gains, a period in another country provides a new insight into people and cultures that is unlikely to be gained by merely being a tourist. As Owen Rutter (1936) put it in his book about the West Indies, "...living abroad is a very different thing from travelling abroad".

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