

Appropriate Student Participation in Providing Patient Care During Clinical Experiences Abroad

Acquiring clinical experience is a vital part of student preparation for careers in medicine, dentistry and other health care professions. Many students are now taking advantage of opportunities to gain experience in foreign countries where regulations concerning what students cannot do are less stringent, poorly defined or the existing regulations unenforced. While some students have gained excellent experiences abroad and valuable service has been provided to people in need, the potential for harm and abuse in these situations cannot be ignored. Participation of inadequately trained students can have negative consequences including:

- **Harm done to the patient.** Our goal is to always help those in need, and the first step in that direction must be to avoid causing harm. As a student, it may be difficult to know what might cause harm so you must carefully avoid situations where there is any possibility that you might hurt someone.
- **Legal trouble with local authorities.** Even if a local doctor is supervising, or says that it is OK for you to perform a procedure, violation of local laws is still a punishable offence.
- **Putting your acceptance to professional schools at risk.** Many students think that the more in-depth clinical experience they have, the stronger their applications will be. However, taking on tasks that are beyond your training will make you look unethical, foolish and irresponsible to admission committees, and thus diminish or eliminate your chance for acceptance.
- **Losing money to a fraudulent company.** There are many companies that will, for a fee, help place you in a foreign clinic. Be aware that these companies are in the business of making money first, and where money is to be made there will be some who do so dishonestly. Check out these companies very carefully before signing any contracts. If an agency is pushing the idea that you will actually get to practice medicine while abroad, rather than simply observe and learn, you should have serious reservations about its ethical practices.
- **Physical harm to yourself.** Engaging in medical practices without sufficient training and protection can under certain circumstances result in harm to you as well as to the patient.

Although we cannot provide a list of every appropriate and inappropriate activity students may encounter, please consider carefully these broad guidelines to help choose your course of action:

1. The primary purpose of student clinical experience is observation, not hands-on treatment. You are there to learn, not to treat.
2. While it may be possible for students to learn and provide some basic patient care, more advanced techniques are far beyond the scope of a short training period. For example, students should not diagnose diseases, dispense medications, use scalpels or perform any invasive techniques. In dentistry, providing anesthesia, tooth extraction and applying sealants are among the procedures in which students should never engage personally.
3. There will always be disparity in what individual students are ready to do. Some students will be better prepared to take on more advanced patient care (from previous EMT training, for example) than others. Therefore, just because one of your peers has been

able to successfully perform a particular task does not mean that you are also ready to tackle it. Be aware of your limitations and do not try to exceed them.

4. Always keep the welfare of the patient foremost in your mind, not the perceived opportunity for proving yourself to an admissions committee. Ask yourself how you would feel if you were in the place of a patient and a college student with no significant medical experience were about to perform this procedure on you. If this thought makes you feel uncomfortable, it is probably not an appropriate task for you to be doing.

You should also be aware that it is not necessary to travel abroad to serve those in dire need. There are many opportunities to help the poor and other underserved groups here in the US. There are likely many worthwhile volunteer opportunities in your community, with many more around the country. Many professional schools will be more impressed with what you can do to help close to home rather than while abroad.

By signing below, you are stating that you have received, read and understood these guidelines.

Name: _____

Date: _____