

Personal Health and Wellbeing during the Global Health Residency

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1. Introduction

The Global Health Residency completes the training in Global Health and Tropical Medicine and offers a unique opportunity for every resident to consolidate the skills and knowledge gained during the clinical residencies and NTC in the Netherlands. It has been designed such that residents develop important competencies in the fields of preventative medicine, infectious tropical diseases, the organisation and management of care, governance and advocacy and intercultural aspects of healthcare. The 6 months spent working under supervision in a low-resource setting aims to prepare residents for their future work at the crossroads of clinical care and public health, in an international setting, often for disadvantaged populations.

The Global Health Residency thus forms an invaluable part of the training for the future doctor GH&TM. Having said this, the OIGT recognises that traveling and working abroad comes with risks that one might not be confronted with in the Netherlands. One's personal health and wellbeing therefore deserve attention. This document is written for the resident who is about to embark on

this residency and highlights some of the most important aspects to think of prior, during and after one's time abroad.

2. Responsibilities

The OIGT has a *facilitatory* role when it comes to the personal health and wellbeing of her residents. We can only effectively assist you if you take full responsibility to leave *well-prepared* and take the *necessary precautions* to preserve your own safety and welfare during your time abroad.

It is thus also your *own responsibility* to ensure a stable physical and mental health status prior to departure. Be aware that postings in some countries may not be compatible with some medical conditions. Please consult your family doctor, treating physician or travel health clinic consultant prior to departure to discuss this.

3. Insurance

You are responsible for organizing your own health care insurance during your global health residency.

4. Overview of preparatory measures

Important steps in ensuring you are well-prepared prior to departure are highlighted below:

- Have a medical check-up done to see whether you are physically and mentally fit to work in the country where you have been placed for your residency - there are likely some health and safety risks and you may need to address pre-existing health conditions and/or take action to prevent potential ones;
- Have your vaccination status updated in line with the requirements for the country you will be working in;
- Reflect on the tuberculosis (TB) burden in the country where you have been placed, discuss protective measures and/or follow-up (tests before departure and after return; BCG, HIV test). Note that this is particularly important for countries where multi-drug-resistant TB (MDR-TB) is prevalent;
- Have your blood group determined and discuss the desirability of having your HIV status tested;
- Ensure you have taken the necessary precautions against malaria where applicable;
- Have a dental check-up before you leave;
- Determine what is necessary for your own mental wellbeing while away from home in a different and possibly stressful environment.

5. Focus on specific health issues

5.1. When to contact the OIGT

The sections below provide some basic guidelines on the most important health risks that one can be exposed to during one's time abroad. In general we encourage you to get in touch with the international liaison officer of the OIGT in case of any health concerns. The OIGT has a broad network of medical specialists with extensive experience in low-resource settings. If necessary, we can put you in touch with members of this advisory panel.

Please note that certain infectious diseases are reportable under Dutch law. This means that you *must* inform the OIGT when you suspect personal infection with or an outbreak of the following pathogens:

Group A:

- 2019-nCoV
- MERS-coronavirus
- Smallpox
- Polio
- Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)
- Viral hemorrhagic fevers

Group B:

- Human infection with an animal strain of influenza
- Diphtheria
- The plague
- Rabies
- Tuberculosis

5.2. Pregnancy

It is not advisable to leave on your global health residency pregnant or to become pregnant during your time abroad. This is primarily because of increased vulnerability to health risks for both yourself and your unborn baby. Pregnant women are for instance much more susceptible to malaria and hepatitis E. Additionally, there may be delays in care when there are complications. It is also important to keep in mind that pregnancy might be a relative contra-indication for some vaccinations.

5.3. Vaccinations

Seek advice from a travel health clinic about the required vaccinations specific to the country where you have been placed. It is of utmost importance that you follow these recommendations diligently. Be aware that some vaccinations require several injections with an interval of several weeks, and that it may take 1-4 weeks before a vaccination is fully protective.

5.4. Malaria

Taking the necessary precautions to protect yourself against malaria is strongly advised in those settings with possible malaria transmission. Consider the following measures:

- Chemoprophylaxis. There are several prophylactic regimens of which mefloquine (Lariam®), atovaquon-proguanil (Malarone®) and doxycycline are the most well-known. Visit a doctor who can advise you on the preferred drug on grounds of your medical history;
- Ensuring you sleep under a mosquito net that has been impregnated with permethrin;
- Wearing protective clothes covering everything except the face and hands between dusk and dawn to prevent bites;
- Using insecticide spray containing pyrethrum in one's living and sleeping areas;
- Making use of mosquito coils (usually these can be purchased locally); and
- Application of insect repellent that contains diethyltoluamide (DEET 30%).

5.5. Tuberculosis

The global health residency carries the risk of exposure to and infection with tuberculosis (TB). Keep in mind that a weakened immune system (previous immune-suppressive treatment, diabetes, HIV etc.) increases this risk. We advise you to make a responsible and well-informed judgment on whether you decide to get vaccinated against TB before departure and the need

for testing after returning from your global health residency (Tuberculin Skin Test (TST) and/or Interferon-Gamma Release Assay test (IGRA)).

5.6. Sexually transmitted infections (STI's) and HIV

You are strongly advised to always practice safe sex: use a condom!

Please ensure safe medical practice at all times. This should not differ from what you are used to in the Netherlands - be it wearing gloves when putting in iv-lines, wearing eye protection during a delivery, ensuring you have a mask on the TB wards or disinfecting your hands after examining a patient.

In case of an accidental exposure to blood or body fluids (AEB) we refer to the OIGT *SOP AEB*.

5.7. Viral hemorrhagic fevers

5.7.1. Yellow fever, Ebola, Marburg, Lassa

On the African continent in particular there are regular outbreaks of epidemics of viral hemorrhagic fevers. One should be vaccinated against yellow fever and have a low threshold of suspicion when it comes to the other hemorrhagic fevers.

2.6.2 Dengue, Chikungunya, Zika

Personal protective measures aimed at bite prevention of the Aedes mosquito transmitting the above diseases is strongly recommended. Again: when in doubt about one's own health, consult your local supervisor and/or the OIGT international liaison officer.

5.8. Diarrhoea

Diarrhoea can be caused by a host of viruses and microorganisms and is a common condition when working and living in resource-poor settings. Be aware that in the contexts where you are placed, it is of utmost importance to maintain a frequent hand washing routine in order to break the chain of transmission of these microorganisms. Drinking water should be filtered and boiled. Ice cubes should only be made from water that has been filtered and/or boiled. Boil unpasteurized milk. Do not eat raw vegetables, even if they have been washed in clean water since washing will not remove all the bacteria, amoebae or intestinal parasites. Remember the rule: 'Cook it, peel it or leave it'.

5.9. Schistosomiasis

Avoid contact with fresh surface water in areas where schistosomiasis may be present. Consider getting tested after completion of your global health residency upon return to the Netherlands.

5.10. Road traffic accidents

Road traffic accidents are by far the leading cause of death of healthcare workers in the developing world. Poor roads, bad cars, stray animals, alcohol and bad driving contribute to this risk. Use your common sense and good judgment when using the road: wear seatbelts, do not drive at night and be cautious when choosing public transportation.

5.11. Symptoms checklist

As doctors, it can be challenging to diagnose oneself and often the tendency exists to care for one's patients and trivialize personal complaints. Below is a list to give some guidance on when to seek medical care. Keep in mind that this list is by no means exhaustive!

- Fever persisting for more than a week
- Diarrhoea persisting for more than two weeks and/or accompanied with:
 - a fever that persists for more than three days and/or
 - bloody stools and/or
 - persistent weight loss
- Night sweats that persist for more than two weeks;
- Fatigue that persists for longer than two weeks without any apparent cause;
- Skin rash or itch that persists for longer than two weeks without any apparent cause;
- Coughing that persists for more than three weeks;
- Persistent sleeping disorders, anxious or depressive thoughts;
- Anxiety for reasons other than those listed above

6. Mental health

6.1. Introduction

Living abroad and working in a low-resource setting can be strenuous. Just as it is of utmost importance to take care of your physical health, you should pay due attention to your mental and emotional wellbeing too. The following sections offer practical suggestions for recognizing and dealing with stress during your global health residency. We also briefly touch on the subject of trauma – the psychological impact of shocking events and how to deal with the aftereffects.

6.2. Stress

6.2.1. Stressors during your residency

In the field you may experience stress when challenged with the unknowns of living in a foreign country and being immersed in a different culture. You may feel extremely tense in times of unrest or when you are unable to save a patient. Or you may experience stress when dealing with environmental hardships such as a harsh climate or primitive living conditions.

Some of the stressors you may encounter are listed here:

- *Climate*: Extreme heat, humidity, mud, dust.
- *Location*: Long distances between the hospital you are working in and the capital.
- *Culture*: National or religious customs, cultural attitudes towards work, communication with national staff, communication among expats of different nationalities.
- *Transportation*: Bad roads, inadequate means of transportation.
- *Insects and animals*: Mosquitoes, flies, snakes, scorpions, fleas.
- *Hygiene and health concerns*: Risk of malaria, diarrhea, long distances to the nearest hospital.
- *Housing*: Lack of privacy, house situated in an unfavorable location, house too small, frequent guests.
- *Food*: Strange food, monotonous diet, inadequate hygiene in the kitchen.
- *Security and safety concerns*: Checkpoints, military movements, civil unrest, lootings, holdups, restricted movement or curfews.
- *Relationships at home*: Concerns about family or friends, lack of support, family expectations or demands.
- *Work*: Too much work, too little work, insufficient staff, overstaffing, unclear assignments, lack of information, frequent changes in plans and procedures, lack of adequate materials, inadequate office space.
- *Team functioning*: Lack of team cohesion, rivalry, differences in educational backgrounds or work experience, unclear communication among team members, or between management and team

members, composition of the team (men/women, couples/singles), differences in work attitude, conflicts.

- *Management:* Starting work without a handover, insufficient functional feedback (appraisals, coaching, monitoring, supervision), unclear assignments, insufficient delegation of responsibilities, unclear decision-making process, unclear procedures.

As a resident, you may be exposed to many of the above stressors over a prolonged period of time. Ongoing stress can be pervasive and subtle; it may accumulate unnoticed. It is important, therefore, that you take an inventory of your stressors regularly.

6.2.2. Stress management skills

Stress management skills generally focus on the following areas:

- *Behavioral:* learning to change your reactions to stressors. Behavioral changes can be achieved by analyzing the situation and its antecedents, and by reconditioning healthy responses. Behavioral skills may include time management, assertiveness, conflict management and communication.
- *Physiological:* learning to modulate your physical response to stressors. Physiological stress management skills include meditation, yoga, deep relaxation, visualization and self-hypnosis.
- *Cognitive:* learning to change the way you think about the stressful situation in order to feel less tense and respond more effectively. Cognitive skills are particularly useful for addressing stressors that tend to make a person angry and frustrated.

6.3. Burnout

Emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, emotionally distancing oneself and feelings of decreased accomplishment are some of the characteristics of burnout. If you feel you are on the road to burnout, please make sure to speak to someone about this.

6.4. Traumatic events

6.4.1. Traumatic events during your residency

As a healthcare professional you have an increased risk of being exposed to traumatic events. A traumatic event is any unusual event involving the personal safety of yourself or that of others. An important characteristic of a traumatic event (or “critical incident”) is that it has an intense emotional impact, causing fear and a sense of extreme powerlessness. Major disasters such as wars, floods, earthquakes, and horrific events such as kidnappings, the death of a colleague or large-scale accidents (airplane or train crash) are clearly traumatizing. However, traumatic experiences are not limited to these uncommon events. For example, many individuals have experienced a mugging, physical or sexual assault, a car crash or other traumatic events which occur in the ordinary, daily lives of people everywhere. Witnessing chronic misery and destruction on a daily basis can also cause trauma. You may experience feelings of sadness and hopelessness when you see certain living conditions during your public health outreach, or are unable to save the life of a patient due to financial reasons.

6.4.2. Emotional reactions to traumatic events

If you experience a traumatic event, bear in mind that you will go through a difficult emotional period. Initial reactions are commonly shock and fear, but in the aftermath of a traumatic event,

people can experience all kinds of emotions such as anger, guilt, shame, grief, despair, anxiety and a sense of alienation.

6.4.3. Physical reactions to traumatic events

Following a traumatic event, people often experience certain physical complaints in addition to the emotional reactions described above. Sometimes, physical symptoms only develop many weeks after the traumatic event. Common physical reactions include:

- Insomnia
- Lack of concentration
- Short-term memory problems
- Muscle tension, headaches, backache
- Heart palpitations
- Dizziness, hyperventilation
- Nausea, diarrhea
- Extreme fatigue

6.4.4. Social and professional support

Please discuss traumatic events with your local supervisor and the OIGT. In turn, professional assistance can be organized as soon as possible, which is essential in preventing the development of post-traumatic symptoms or, in the long run, burnout or depression.

As a trauma survivor, you must bear in mind that the healing process will occur over time. The below tips should not be viewed as a replacement for professional support but can offer guidance in the initial phases:

- *Safety comes first:* Make sure that you are in a place where you feel (physically) safe. Traumatized individuals should be helped to leave the unsafe environment. If this is not possible, take efforts to make the environment as safe as possible, and to provide adequate protection. Having a buddy assigned to you (e.g. during the period of evacuation) may also give you a sense of safety.
- *Work on factual reconstruction:* Facing the reality of a situation helps people to process the emotions and sensations they have experienced. This means talking about the event or writing down what happened, including as many details and facts as possible. Some people feel that it is helpful to return to the scene of the incident or read about the event in the newspaper, but any means of making a factual reconstruction (e.g. drawing a map of where it happened) will promote the healing process. During this process, you will relive, consciously or subconsciously, some of the traumatic emotions and sensations, and this will cause tension. However, by repeating this process, the intensity and pain of these emotions will gradually diminish.
- *Find a supportive environment:* Traumatic events always involve strong emotions. Survivors of a traumatic event need to express their feelings and thoughts to empathetic and caring people, people who are able to listen to all your concerns without passing judgment. Find a trusted team member, friend or relative with whom you feel comfortable, and talk to this person regularly.
- *Physical health is important too:* It is important to preserve your physical strength during the healing process. Eating well, getting enough rest, exercising regularly and engaging in relaxation exercises promotes mental health. Conversely, excessive alcohol or drug use may inhibit recovery.

- *It takes time:* Do not expect the memories and emotions connected to the traumatic events to disappear overnight. You will experience these sensations in varying degrees for weeks or even months before they gradually become less overwhelming. Continue to share your thoughts and feelings with others, and bear in mind that healing takes time.
- *The benefit of structured activities:* A traumatized individual can easily become passive or withdrawn in the aftermath of a traumatic event. A balance should be found between recuperation and activity, so it is a good idea to structure your days or weeks after a traumatic event. Arrange regular times for relaxation, exercise, and social contacts. Many survivors find that a gradual return to normal, daily activities promotes healing.
- *The need for privacy:* Expats often experience a “reverse culture shock” upon returning to their home country; they have trouble relating to their families and friends and experience a certain alienation. Trauma survivors may feel this even more keenly. While a supportive social environment is essential, it is also important to regularly spend time alone and limit social obligations and contacts when you return to your home country.
- *Previous traumatic experiences:* The feelings of grief or fear from the traumatic event may resurface if you are exposed to another traumatic event in the future. Even a minor event may trigger these feelings. Being aware of this possibility will decrease the negative impact.
- *Medication:* Many traumatized individuals consult a psychologist or psychiatrist, who may recommend medication that can enhance recovery. Various psychogenic drugs that have few side effects are available. It is important to consult a knowledgeable professional who can determine which medication will be beneficial, and who can monitor the effects during treatment.
- *Decision-making:* Postpone any important decisions that are not directly related to the traumatic events. This is not the time to take significant steps such as ending a relationship, moving house, or changing your financial situation.

7. Conclusion

Optimal physical and mental health during your 6 months abroad is of utmost importance for a successful global health residency. Many of the issues discussed in this guideline may seem self-explanatory, but correct implementation in the new setting may prove challenging. Remember: Good preparation is key. Always use your common sense. And get in touch with us!

Email

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