

# ENT Beyond our Borders: A Humanitarian approach

Those of us who have private as well as public practices eventually encounter some form of stagnation, being in the same work environment and listening to the same chief complaints for years upon years. As a result our energy, spirit, and drive in our profession is affected. Humanitarian medical opportunities offer one a unique opportunity to travel, share one's knowledge with foreign colleagues, and at the same time care for those much less fortunate in the world through medical and surgical treatments. Above all else it helps to rejuvenate one's spirit towards the practice of medicine and restore the words one uttered to the medical school admissions committee when they applied to medical school and were asked why they wanted to be a physician.

There are endless opportunities in humanitarian medicine worldwide. One of the best resources is the internet website of the American Academy of Otolaryngology under the humanitarian section ([www.ent-net.org](http://www.ent-net.org)). There you can choose from a map of the world a location you are interested in and the various programmes in that region will appear. Also on the internet you can find out what the travel requirements are for various countries ([www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov)) and the country's demographics ([www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook](http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook)).

In choosing a programme it is important to note the programme's sponsor, whether it has a religious affiliation (if that is of concern to you), what surgical expertise is needed (general ENT or specialists in Otolaryngology, Head and Neck, Rhinology, etc.), what costs the volunteer is responsible for (room and board, air-lines), are there specific language skills required, and the length of volunteer service.

Once one elects to volunteer then they need to realise that the area they are going to visit will not resemble their country. Outside the developed world only 1% of the population has a college education, 1% have computers, 50% experience malnutrition, 70% are unable to read, and 89% live in substandard housing. The facility where you volunteer might be a native hut with dirt floors, the hospital where you might perform surgery will look much like the hospitals of 50 years ago, the equipment you use will be outdated (recommendations are to bring your own), the selection of suture material very limited, and lighting

below the quality one is used to.

Your patients will not arrive in their late model cars or SUV. The majority will either walk to the facility you are at or take the public transportation system if

they can afford the few dollars it may cost. Most live in substandard housing where multiple generations of a family live. Their daily struggle is not fighting traffic getting home or thinking about the digital camera they want to buy, but rather do they have enough to feed their family that day.

Instead of operating on the bread and butter cases (tonsils, tubes, sinus disease, nasal obstruction), one is challenged with stage four head and neck cancers, advanced ear disease, and common benign disorders which as a result of lack of medical attention present as challenging cases.

Margaret Mead, the famous anthropologist, could not have said it better through her teaching of generations of students about the value of looking carefully and openly at other cultures to better understand the complexities of being human, when she said, 'A small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed it's the only thing that ever has.'

In 2000, I founded Global ENT Outreach ([www.geoutreach.org](http://www.geoutreach.org)), a foundation whose efforts are focused on helping the underserved and less fortunate globally with disorders of the Ears,

Nose, and Throat. To date we have worked in Honduras, Niue, Suriname, Cuba, Ethiopia, New Zealand, and soon to be involved in programs in Peru and the Middle East. I challenge you to get involved in humanitarian medicine, which will be humbling, challenging, enlightening, and change the way you view the world forever.



**ENT doctors in Honduras learning ear surgery.**



**Children in a truck in Niue.**



**Two brothers in Honduras rural area.**

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