



International Health is Preventive Medicine

Why should you care about international health care? It really is in everybody's interest.

Infectious disease is making a worldwide comeback and the United States is not immune. As a student, now is the time to familiarize yourself with diseases rarely seen in the United States.

American foreign assistance programs have saved millions of lives. You can play a part both during and after your medical training.

You can make a difference.

"For much of this century the United States has served as the 'world's policeman' in armed crises. Now, with the cold war over, it may be time to put on the hat of "world's doctor," alone or in concert with others. As the danger of nuclear war recedes, we may have less to fear from rogue nations than from rogue viruses."--New York Times editorial, May 12, 1995

Infectious disease is making a frightening worldwide comeback. You can help fight back.

Until relatively recently, the world's long struggle for control over infectious diseases was in sight. Smallpox was eradicated and half a dozen other diseases were close to elimination. Nearly eighty percent of the world's children were immunized against the six top killer diseases. Antimicrobial drugs were effectively suppressing countless infections.

Recently, however, it has become clear that the struggle to control infectious diseases is far from over -- even in the United States. "We stand on the brink of a global crisis in infectious diseases. No country is safe from them. No country can any longer afford to ignore their threat," said Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO).

Diseases that seemed to be subdued, such as tuberculosis and malaria, are making a serious comeback around the world and in the United States. Some diseases, such as cholera and yellow fever, are striking in regions once thought safe from them.

In addition, deadly new diseases, such as Ebola hemorrhagic fever, are demanding headlines and threatening many parts of the world. The last few years have seen the emergence of a completely new strain of cholera in Asia. In South America, Venezuelan hemorrhagic fever and Brazilian hemorrhagic fever have emerged -- both fatal and both caused by newly-recognized viruses related to the one which causes Lassa fever in Africa.

The World Health Organization reports that at least 30 new diseases have emerged in the last 20 years. For many of these diseases, there is no treatment, cure or vaccine.

As physicians, you have the responsibility to confront these threats. As students, you can take time to study abroad, bettering your understanding and familiarizing yourself with the signs and symptoms of diseases that are rarely seen in the United States. You will become familiar with disease often not seen in the United States, which will undoubtedly help you with the cultural diversity of patients you will have as a U.S. clinician. Not only will you be aiding in the global struggle for control over infectious disease, but you will be preparing yourself for those diseased patients who come to you in the United States in need of immediate diagnosis and treatment.

Viruses know no borders. The United States feels the threat of infectious disease spread.

Infectious diseases are the world's leading cause of death, killing at least 17 million people - mostly young children - every year. As has been witnessed by the spread of HIV/AIDS, the United States is not immune to the explosive expansion of infectious disease.

Tuberculosis is reappearing in the United States and other industrialized nations, where the disease was believed to have been defeated. Migration, international travel and tourism has increasingly allowed tuberculosis to reach U.S. soil. The U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports that one third of all U.S. tuberculosis cases are among foreign-born individuals. In some U.S. areas, such as San Diego County, 70 percent of people diagnosed with tuberculosis were born in another country. Additionally, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports that migrants and visitors to the United States are more likely to be resistant to common tuberculosis treatments, such as rifampin and streptomycin.

In the United States, there have also been recent epidemics of infections due to contaminated food and public water supplies, and the emergence of new diseases, such as hantavirus pulmonary syndrome. This disease was recently discovered in the southwestern United States. It is caused by a previously unknown hantavirus, transmitted to humans by field mice, and has been fatal in more than half the 60 cases identified.

In 1993, the largest U.S. outbreak of water-borne illness occurred when more than 400,000 people in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, suffered prolonged diarrhea. The cause of these outbreaks: water supplies contaminated by human or animal feces containing the intestinal parasite cryptosporidium. About 4,400 people needed hospital treatment, and more than 100 people died. A series of less severe outbreaks of cryptospordium contamination have occurred in 11 other states since 1990.

As a physician and as a physician-in-training, you can help to control the spread of infectious disease internationally, thus helping to keep the disease out of the United States. International training offers you the chance to gain valuable skills, including language and patient communication skills, diagnostic skills, and skills involved with different models of medical care, such as acupuncture, herbal remedies, holistic medicines, yoga, meditation, and many others. This training will teach you to rely on your innate judgment and common sense, your hands, eyes and intuition, rather than relying on sophisticated equipment and tests.

Foreign aid has led to significant accomplishments.

Despite often-publicized humanitarian disasters, there have been amazing long-term advances in the war to protect children from killer diseases.

Development programs have contributed to:

- A 31 percent worldwide reduction in the number of children worldwide who die from the five top killers (pneumonia, diarrhea, measles, tetanus and whooping cough) over the past ten years. In the fight against measles alone, 1.4 million fewer children under five years old die than did in 1983.
- A large increase in the number of couples who know of and exercise their family planning options. In fact, more than 50 million couples worldwide presently use family planning to control family size.
- The saving of one million lives each year through the use of oral rehydration therapy (ORT). This low-cost, easily administered solution developed in Bangladesh with U.S. foreign assistance is credited with saving tens of millions of children's lives. ORT helps sick children retain fluids and stave off deadly dehydration.

You can make a difference.

- 1. **BECOME MORE KNOWLEDGEABLE:** Take an international health course or encourage your school to develop and offer one.
- 2. RAISE MONEY OR COLLECT SUPPLIES FOR CLINICS OR VILLAGE COLLECTIVES: Contact AMSA for more information.
- 3. **STUDY SPANISH OR ANOTHER USEFUL LANGUAGE; BECOME CULTURALLY COMPETENT:** Begin your studies here in the U.S., then go abroad. Understanding your patients is essential to practicing medicine effectively.
- 4. SERVE INTERNATIONALLY: Use AMSA's directories or programs to plan an international elective.
- 5. **VOLUNTEER YOUR EXPERTISE AND TIME IN UNDERSERVED U.S. COMMUNITIES:** Look for opportunities to serve in migrant clinics and underserved areas.
- 6. RAISE LOCAL AWARENESS: Plan a lunchtime speaker series. Distribute information to your colleagues.
- 7. **BEGIN GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING:** Lead a letter writing campaign to local media and community leaders about a pressing international issue.

For More Information Contact:

Project Concern International / OPTIONS (619) 279-9690
National Council on International Health (202) 833-5900
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (404) 639-2603
World Health Organization (202) 331-9081
PanAmerican Health Organization (202) 974-3000
U.S. Agency for International Development (202) 647-1850
InterAction (202) 667-8227

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