

Policy Document

Overseas Medical Placements Policy

Background

The Australian Medical Students' Association (AMSA) is the peak representative body of Australian medical students. AMSA believes that all communities have the right to the best attainable health.[1] As such, AMSA has a key role in advocating for medical curricula that is of the highest quality and equips future generations of health practitioners with the necessary knowledge and skills to deliver the highest quality of care to patients and the community.

Overseas medical elective placements are a key component of most medical school curricula across Australia.[2] These placements provide Australian medical students with valuable opportunities to develop an understanding of medicine and health systems in other countries, as well as develop their understanding of the broader determinants of health.

The Australian Medical Students' Association and the Australian Medical Association's recently published Guide to Working Abroad provides an excellent resource to assist medical students, their student societies, and medical faculties in the transition towards sustainable and ethical overseas medical placements.[3]

Despite the inherent value of overseas medical electives, they can also negatively impact the hosting community ultimately harming both the student and the local community. AMSA believes that sustainable and ethical opportunities should be encouraged, and developed in a socially responsible manner.

Position Statement

AMSA believes that overseas medical placements should adopt an approach that minimises risk and maximises benefit, both to the student and the receiving community.

Such placements should be encouraged by all medical education institutions.

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Policy

AMSA calls upon the Australian medical schools, medical student organisations and overseas medical placement providers that currently facilitate overseas medical placements to:

1. Ensure participation in pre-departure training opportunities for students taking part in overseas medical placements. Such a program should provide students with:
 - a. An understanding of medical ethics as outlined in the International Code of ethics of the World Medical Association (WMA) and the WMA Medical Ethics Manual.
 - b. Support to develop adequate communication skills including basic language training and the use of translation services where English is not the first language.
 - c. A background to the culture of the community they will be working in, and an understanding of how this might impact on healthcare;
 - d. An understanding of the legal issues they may encounter whilst undertaking an overseas medical placement;
 - e. Information regarding personal and travel safety considerations specific to the travel destination;
 - f. The opportunity to discuss any expectations or concerns the student may have of their placement.
2. Develop sustainable and mutually beneficial relationships with organisations and communities in any medical placements undertaken. These multi-faceted relationships ensure that students not only gain learning experiences from their host placements, but also create opportunities to give back to these organisations. This applies in particular to low or middle resource settings, where actions can be taken to help and meet the areas of need identified.
3. Adopt or continue the practice of incorporating overseas medical placements as a component of their medical curricula.
4. Address issues surrounding ethics and the need to ensure local community safety at all events promoting overseas medical electives.
5. Improve the safety and well-being of students undertaking overseas medical placements, by providing relevant and accurate information for medical students.
6. Develop focused goals, in collaboration with the host community, to help ensure the placement provides a valuable educational experience and is beneficial for community health.
7. Where these placements are at low or middle resource settings, schools or student body should consult the host community about ways they may contribute to community health development, including through the provision of medical equipment and contributing, within their capabilities, to local training and capacity building.
8. Ensure participation in post-elective debriefing opportunities for students that have completed overseas medical placement. Debriefing should provide students with a safe and confidential environment to:
 - a. Report and discuss any incidents that occurred during the placement that threatened or compromised the students mental or physical well-being;
 - b. Share the successful aspects of the placement changes to the elective program with the intention to consolidate on learning as well as personal and professional growth cultivated by elective experience;
 - c. Discuss and reflect on the ethical dilemmas that they experienced or witnessed that are inherent to electives in resource poor settings; and
 - d. Provide feedback to appropriate academic and administrative staff to facilitate improvement of future electives.

AMSA affirms its stance that medical students undertaking overseas medical placements should:

1. Ethical Conduct
 - a. Always place the needs of the receiving community first;
 - b. Adhere to the same medical ethical standards that are enshrined in the International Code of Ethics of the World Medical Association (WMA), and more specifically the WMA Medical Ethics Manual;^{[4],[5]}
 - c. Recognise personal and professional limits and never act beyond these in the provision of care, including clinical decision-making and medical procedures, always ensuring adequate supervision;
 - d. Take special consideration for language and cultural barriers when obtaining consent from a patient; and
 - e. Practice cultural safety and sensitivity at all times.
2. Pre-Departure Training
 - a. Participate in a pre-departure training that provides comprehensive information about the placement where possible.
3. Sustainable Organisational Relationships
 - a. Students are encouraged to participate in any medical placements that has the capacity to host such placements. These placements should be aimed at creating sustainable relationships and open channels between organisations. This facilitates exchange of ideas and learning experiences that can fuel these long-term relationships
 - b. If these placements are at low or middle resource settings, ensure that students do not interfere in the training of local medical and allied health students, by giving them priority in training.
 - c. Ensure that their placement is part of a broader effort, which encourages horizontal programming for the local community.

References

1. The Australian Medical Students' Association. AMSA Policy - Health and Human Rights. 2010 [5 July 2011]. Available from: <http://www.amsa.org.au/sites/default/files/Health%20andHuman%20Rights%20Policy.pdf>
2. Goldsmid J. A preliminary study on travel health issues of medical students undertaking electives. *J Travel Med.* 2003;10(3):160-3.
3. Parker J, Mitchell R, Mansfield S, Jamieson J, Humphreys D, Hersch F, et al. A Guide to Working Abroad: For Australian Medical Students and Junior Doctors. *The Medical Journal of Australia.* 2011;194.
4. The World Medical Association. WMA International Code of Medical Ethics. London; 2008.
5. The World Medical Association. Medical Ethics Manual. Ferney-Voltaire Cedex; 2009.

Policy Details

Name: Overseas Medical Placements Policy

Category: G – Global Health

History: Adopted, Second Council, 2013
Following a review and repeal of a similar policy adopted in 2011.