

Washington Family Physician

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Global Impact: Volunteer Opportunities for Family Physicians

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Family physicians of Washington State are invited to volunteer for travel to Vietnam and Peru this summer as participants in Global Impact, a Seattle Community Colleges service learning program presented in partnership with Seattle-area medical, education and service organizations.

“Traveling with Global Impact will give me a chance to offer my expertise as a retired physician to people in Peru,” offered Peter Seyl, MD, Group Health family physician. “This might mean helping to diagnose and develop a care plan for an infirm individual in a developing country, or it might mean extending my area of expertise to physicians in that country. It also might also mean extending my perspective on medicine to those students and paraprofessionals with our group.”

Physicians and nurses are needed for both the Vietnam and Peru programs, scheduled for the last two weeks of August this year. Peru Quest opportunities include rural health outreach campaigns and health education and research. In Vietnam, the health care team will trek to remote villages in the Mai Chau Highlands and set up clinics. Local physicians and nurses will join these outreach programs.

Don Belcher, MD of UW Medicine (professor emeritus) led the highly successful 2007 Vietnam Village Trek and is returning again to lead the program this summer. “I have known many health professionals who say they would like to volunteer for an international medical program,” said Belcher. “They are unsure how to do this, and never get around to it. That is why the well-organized Global Impact program is an opportunity.” Belcher continued, “There is a need for additional doctors and nurses for Global Impact programs this summer. Experienced health professionals have an advantage in their service skills and in being highly respected in a traditional society. While there is no age limit, applicants should be in good physical shape—volunteer work takes place in modest settings with limited facilities, and there are physical and environmental challenges.”

Details of these programs are at www.seattlecolleges.edu/globalimpact

Background

Global Impact began three years ago with a single program in Central America. In summer 2007, Global Impact offered programs to Belize and Vietnam. A team of 40 people were part of the Vietnam Village Trek, including Vietnamese physicians and nurses and 24 participants from Seattle. The team trekked to three remote villages and established clinics. Nearly 1,000 patients were given health examinations during the trip. According to Dr. Belcher, “I feel drawn to participate in Global Impact as an opportunity for me to work with local doctors and nurses in serving their own people.” “Every facet of last year’s Vietnam Village Trek exceeded my plans and expectations, and I am eager to return this year,” concluded Belcher.

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10 Reasons for an Experienced or Retired Physician to Volunteer in a Developing Country

CHARLES MORRISON, MD, FAMILY PHYSICIAN, COLBERT

So why does a doc who has “paid his dues” not sit back and let someone else worry about the practice of medicine? Why travel to other countries where patients have neither the resources nor the ability to benefit from all we have the knowledge to give them? For that matter, why pay travel expenses to go there and probably sleep on the ground without the luxuries we normally live with to see a lot of people with health problems we can't do much about anyway?

Let me count some of the reasons:

1. We love the practice of medicine!
2. There are people whose lives will be better because we care enough to be there even without our backup technology!
3. It is exciting to know that the “art of medicine” can still help people!
4. It is humbling to realize “Best Practices” aren't, in places that don't have access to the resources we have. They do however have diabetes and asthma!
5. There are many, many people in the world who appreciate your attention to them as a doctor who don't even think about whether it is “their right” or not!
6. We have learned things about people over the years that can help others live better lives—and if we make the effort to listen, make our own lives a little better also!
7. Few medical meetings are as informative as working with doctors from other countries!
8. Sometimes medical service travel allows you to know people from home in ways you never knew them while at home!
9. A experienced or retired doctor who participates in foreign medical service to less fortunate people in the world sometimes really looks special in the eyes of grandchildren!
10. FINALLY. Back home in your own bed really feels good after sleeping on foreign ground a few nights!

Note: The author participated in the Global Impact 2007 Vietnam Village Trek and will join the Tanzania program this Summer 2008. ■

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