

DOCTOR'S DIGEST PODCAST



Volunteering

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Welcome to this podcast by Doctor's Digest, bridging the gap between the business of medicine and the practice of medicine, with single-topic manuals that provide practice solutions from the experts.

Volunteering is a wonderful way for a physician to reach new heights of personal satisfaction and growth. The reasons for volunteering are as diverse as the people who do it. Their main motive is usually to help other people, but there are plenty of other benefits as well. If you're just starting in practice, for example, speaking at community events or participating in health fairs can offer you valuable exposure to build a patient base. If you're new to a neighborhood, volunteering is a quick route to meeting like-minded people. And if you love to travel, volunteering in another country is a great opportunity to get to know another culture first hand.

Of course, thousands of organizations need volunteers; so how do you find the best match? Start by asking yourself a few questions. Do you want to stay in the U.S.? What part of the country—or the world—attracts you? Do you prefer a big city or a rural area? Will your work be integrated with your present job, or do you see it as a way of breaking from the day-to-day?

The closest volunteer opportunities may come from the community relations department of the hospital you're affiliated with. Staff members of these offices organize seminars, health fairs, health screenings, speaking engagements, and other community outreach events. Often you can design your own programs based on the needs of your community. For example, one doctor in a rural town became concerned when he diagnosed five teenagers with hepatitis B, and he asked the community relations department at the local hospital what he could do to warn teenagers about risk factors. Pretty soon he found himself presenting a workshop on hepatitis B to eleventh graders—more than fifteen hundred students in all.

Another valuable close-to-home opportunity is free clinics for the uninsured. There are many independent clinics scattered across the nation, and some will even teach you how to start one in your own community.

But suppose you want to volunteer in a developing country; where do you start? One expert offers a list of key questions that you should explore before you sign up. First, find out about the organization's professional affiliations. Is it part of a national network or an offshoot of a medical center or university? Is it affiliated with the government or with the United Nations?

Then ask for references. You may want to talk with fellow physicians and learn about their experiences working abroad through the organization.

Next, ask about the level of support and accommodations. You may require only modest accommodations or you may need a higher level, say a hotel or guesthouse. Would you be okay sharing a room with six people you've never met?

Then ask about emergency procedures. Is there someone local you could contact twenty-four-seven in case of emergency? And how would your family back home be able to reach you?

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Travel insurance is another important issue. Some organizations provide it; others may ask you to buy it before you travel.

Find out what skills you will need. Will it be only medical care, or will you be asked to use other skills as well?

Is there an orientation program? Should you make any specific preparation before you travel? And what about the language—will you need to learn a new one, or is English commonly understood?

Finally, ask about the program fee. Most programs charge anywhere from five hundred to four thousand dollars, depending on many factors. Some organizations will provide your visa, airfare, meals, language lessons, and more; but others have lower budgets, and volunteers may need to stay in someone's home or provide their own travel insurance. You should also check with the program regarding liability insurance.

One doctor cautions that if you're thinking of putting off volunteering for international missions until you retire, you may want to rethink that plan. Overseas stays can be brutal. You may be on your feet for twelve or thirteen hours every day for a week, performing dozens of operations. You may get sick from the local water or from eating unfamiliar food. Such problems are hard enough when you're young; when you're older, they can be devastating.

Whatever you choose as a volunteer, it's wise to check your ego at the door. Go into the program with an open mind, eager to learn and not just to teach. Ask freely for help, and don't hold back. As many physicians have reported with great satisfaction, volunteering is one place where you're likely to get back far more than you give.

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