

Name: Meghan O’Leary

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Specialty: Pediatrics, General Surgery

Country: Ghana

Location: Kpando, Volta Region

Rural/Urban: Rural

Hospital or non-hospital placement: Hospital

Type of placement: Pre-clerkship

Date: July 7 – August 28, 2011

Project title: Rural Hospital Elective in Pediatrics and General Surgery

Organization: Disaster Volunteers of Ghana, Medical (DIVOG)

Website: <http://www.divog.org>

Main language spoken: English, Ewe (local dialect)

Other language(s): Spanish (by doctors working for the Cuban medical brigade), Twi (another local dialect native to other regions of Ghana)

Project description: Was placed with a small group of clerks from a Ghanaian medical school on 1 month rotations through hospital. Spent one month in pediatrics (in-patient and out-patient clinic) and almost one month in general surgery (OR and accident/emergency). Learned and practiced technical skills taught to clerks such as IV placement, drug administration and injections, suturing and wound care in emergency and OR protocol/minor assisting. Was exposed to diagnosis and management of endemic diseases in pediatrics such as malaria, sickle cell anemia, malnutrition, parasites, pneumonia and typhoid fever. Practiced history taking and focused physical examinations in pediatrics. In surgery, learned procedures and post-op care practices, observed many case and emergent surgical procedures and assisted physicians on minor procedures (cutting sutures, holding retractors, etc.).

Student experience description: It was purely by luck that I met Ghanaian medical students and was asked to join them in their “practical” at the hospital (equivalent to clerkship rotations). If this had not happened I would have been able to meet the hospital administrator and would have chosen which wards to work in for each month. The quality of your hospital experience is very much up to you. Some volunteers chose to observe and had little interaction with patients and staff members. If you express interest and enthusiasm, dress appropriately and get to know the nurses/doctors you will get to do and learn much, much more. Bringing textbooks, clinical manuals, drug guides and tools all helped me learn from patient encounters and doctors were more likely to teach you directly. Asking questions helped ensure I learned a lot.

Placement safety: Very safe. Locks on doors and a security guard for the orphanage compound.

Educational experience (out of 10): 8

Social/cultural experience (out of 10): 9

Does the organization have any religious affiliations? No

At any point did you feel expected to participate in religious activity? No. Family and children went to church every Sunday and volunteers were invited but not expected to attend. Some did and some chose

not to.

Program fee: \$700/month

Dress code: Professional. Clerk coat, scrubs, stethoscope and clinical skills equipment necessary at the hospital, depending which ward you work in.

Accommodation: Volunteers stayed on our own floor above the children in guesthouse-style rooms with our own beds. Locks were provided on doors to keep belongings safe and children were not allowed upstairs. There was one bathroom shared between volunteers that we kept clean ourselves. Meals were provided in the morning and dinnertime (and lunch if you were not at work) and there was plenty of food and water. It is entirely possible to stay at the orphanage without coordinating these logistics through an organization, though there would be a significant process to be placed at the hospital without organization help. Contact information is on the website:

<http://ryvanzmiaorphanage.wordpress.com/>

Accommodation cost: Was included in program fees (\$700/month). If arranging to stay here without an organization, Mama Ese charges a smaller fee she would negotiate with you.

Helpful hints: Bring textbooks – I learned the most from studying diseases commonly seen at the hospital with the other medical students after work. We practiced physical exams and were prepared when questioned by the doctors in the hospital. Take the time to get to know the children at the orphanage. This part of my experience was life-changing. Bring medical supplies to treat common illnesses/wounds at the orphanage. The medical students effectively became the go-to people when any of the children cut themselves, had a fever, were vomiting, etc.

Questions you are glad to have asked before leaving on placement: I was glad someone told me to bring clerk handbooks and professional clothing or I would have felt out of place with the other med students.

Questions you WISHED you asked before leaving on placement: WHICH (of the 3-4 Ghanaian dialects) is spoken in Kpando? I brought books on Twi because I learned some of the language when staying in another city and it turned out that Ewe was the only dialect spoken in Kpando (and English of course).

Overall, would you recommend this placement for future students? Yes, but as I alluded to before, it is what you make it. You will only get out of it what you put in – both medically and culturally. If you are the kind of person who is flexible in a variety of situations, is open to changing schedules and willing to LEARN what the Ghanaians have to offer you instead of CHANGING their culture/medical system, you will have a rich experience. The only people I stayed with who did not enjoy their time in the hospital were those who were so appalled by what they perceived to be bad medical care that they didn't learn from staff WHY something was done a certain way. If you ask lots of questions and understand that in Ghana medicine involves improvisation and "doing the best with the resources given", then you will have a valuable experience.