

MedConnect: Using Experience For A Better Experience

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Medical electives are a time that every medical student looks forward to. In truth, it's often an excuse to travel, but it also provides an arena for students to be able to learn without the high-pressure environment of laborious exams. This is the time where we finally get a choice. A choice in our location, a choice in what we learn and, most of all, a choice in what we achieve. It's the proverbial bonus-round of medical school, where students can decide for themselves just how hard or how little they want to work. The attitude of the medical school is generally ambivalent towards exactly what you do on your elective, only that you fill in the appropriate forms.

Many students choose to do their electives in under-resourced countries around the world, with the spirit of volunteerism and travel in mind. Though there is excellent support for students regarding administrative issues, information on the thousands of elective opportunities abroad is scarce. This can particularly be an issue for electives in the developing world. Medical volunteerism is not a new business concept; in fact it is a very well-oiled money-making machine. In medical students, they often have the perfect game: students, both young and naive, who've often never left the West, with their parents' money ready and willing to make a difference in the impoverished world. Their game is one

based on fear, giving you the keys to the land rover, a local handler, and a guide book to make sure you only see the impoverished areas, not experience them. These companies charge upwards of €2,000 in administrative fees for these experiences, and it is questionable as to where these companies are allocating these funds. The fear they use is one based on experience; they have been there, they know how things work. You don't.

Students have more resources than they often realise. We use it every day in nearly every decision we make: *experience*. It is through word-of-mouth from previous students that we get our advice. We are our own most under-utilised resource and, with a little organization, we can aim to evolve, learning from past mistakes, and building on past success.

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Common practice for most students is use to the shotgun approach, "cold-calling" as many health centres as possible, and taking whichever one replied back. This has created a huge discrepancy in understanding the role of the medical student at these various health centres, and

many anecdotes of students in unacceptable situations have surfaced into med student folklore. Whether it is paying a substantial amount of money for an elective where you end up being treated like a gap-year student, or being sent to a clinic where you are the most medically trained individual with responsibilities that are more suited to a qualified junior doctor. The perceived abilities of undergraduate medical students have been both exaggerated and underestimated, creating uncomfortable situations for both parties. There has also been incongruity in the perceived roles of both the student and the teaching institution.

medConnect has been working with *M.O.V.E.* (Medical Overseas Voluntary Elective), discussing some of the issues that have arisen among participating students, mostly due to the large misunderstanding of what *M.O.V.E.* actually is. *M.O.V.E.* is a student-run charity with the aim of providing fundraising opportunities for students going on elective to developing countries. Their mandate does not go further than this. *M.O.V.E.* and other students alike discovered that there is a large need and desire for information about their electives, and how to attain them. *medConnect's* goal is to fulfil this need.

medConnect hopes to provide students with the collective experiences of their peers through an easy-to-use

online medium. Furthermore, we provide an arena for students to give advice about organizing the peripheral details, such as transport and costs. We also hope to offer brief information sessions on things like the local languages and the specific medical topics to brush up on before going on your specific elective. We hope in the future to establish long-term connections between *medConnect* and health centres in the developing world, with the aim of establishing a reciprocal exchange.

Though still in our first year, *medConnect* has thus far been a success. Analysis of medConnect.ie has shown that the number of visitors to our site has steadily increased every month, and receives visitors from five continents almost daily. Being an Irish-grown organization, we have also established connections with the other Irish universities, receiving reports that we are being used

all over the island from UCD to UCC. However, it would appear that the lowest amount of feedback is from Trinity College Dublin, which seems almost paradoxical, as we are not just an Irish venture, but one born out of TCD. This is something we hope to rectify by creating more awareness of what resources we have to offer. We plan to do this by providing more information as well as more opportunities for suggestions and critiques.

In our experience at *medConnect*, when discussing with senior lecture staff about addressing elective issues, we were told that “this is the way it was always done” and that the experience of failing was important to one’s independence and experience as a medical student. Though there is some logic to learning from one’s individual mistakes, there is just as much logic to learning from mistakes en masse. Medical electives

are a very under-utilised resource, and can be used to spread ideas and international relations, rather than being used as a one-way sieve for resources. Too much can be gained, and too much money is donated, for this to be a simple learning experience of individual trial-and-error. There is too much we have to offer even as medical students for us to be so selfish. Did the ape, upon seeing its neighbour burn itself with fire, touch the fire himself to attempt his own experiment with self-immolation? No, he learned, or perished himself. And just like the ape, we all, including medConnect, must adapt, grow, and evolve.

