Research Summary: Benefits to the NHS of staff volunteering in international low resource settings

The primary benefits of volunteering in low and middle-income countries are aimed at supporting the patients, health professionals and health systems of these countries. This can create the misconception that NHS organisations donate their staff and resources without a clear return. In fact, investing in staff volunteering internationally offers significant secondary benefits for NHS staff and the wider organisation, but these benefits are not always well-defined and understood.

Research by Nottingham University Business School offers clearer insights into the range of benefits for staff and wider NHS organisations of overseas volunteering, but also highlights the potential drawbacks and influencing factors that must be considered when undertaking volunteer work.

Meta-analysis of the available peer-reviewed literature and interviews with a group of global health workers identified over one hundred benefits to staff resulting from undertaking voluntary work overseas. These benefits can be categorised into 7 key ‘core outcome sets’: Clinical Skills, Management skills, Patient experience, Communication and Team work, Service development, Academic Ability, and Personal Satisfaction:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clinical Skills</th>
<th>Management Skills</th>
<th>Patient Experience</th>
<th>Communication and Teamwork</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing existing skills and gaining new ones</td>
<td>Gaining project management experience</td>
<td>Developing a greater understanding of their own impact on patients</td>
<td>Exposure to different working cultures enables staff to better operate in diverse teams</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning to apply existing skills to a broader range of situations</td>
<td>Developing a greater understanding of how healthcare systems function</td>
<td>Improving patient satisfaction through better understanding of multi-cultural health influences</td>
<td>Developing greater flexibility and adaptability in challenging situations</td>
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<th>Service Development</th>
<th>Academic Ability</th>
<th>Personal Satisfaction</th>
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<td>Developing greater appreciation of NHS policies and governance</td>
<td>Improving teaching ability/methods for sharing knowledge and expertise</td>
<td>Developing ability to build professional networks globally</td>
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<td>Increasing enthusiasm and innovative thinking to improve services in the NHS</td>
<td>Developing ability to build professional networks globally</td>
<td>Staff were more likely to find satisfaction in their work and not plan to leave the NHS</td>
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These benefits mean an international volunteering placement can be considered an opportunity for:

- NHS staff’s professional development, including gaining skills, experience and insights.
- Service improvement in the UK, strengthening effective, efficient provision of NHS services.
- Staff satisfaction and retention within the NHS.

**Potential negative outcomes from NHS staff volunteering internationally**

Negative outcomes were far less likely to be reported. The only negative outcome reaching consensus in this research was the potential risk to staff members’ personal health and wellbeing through working in challenging environments. Other risks, which did not reach consensus and are therefore less significant, included: financial cost, staff experiencing accreditation issues, having to work with protocols that may not be best practice in the NHS, and potential loss of the wellbeing benefits of taking annual leave when staff use this for volunteering.

**How to ensure that you get the most from your staff’s international volunteering activity**

The research identified factors that could maximise the potential benefit achieved for NHS staff and services, as well as for the host organisations. These include:

**NHS factors:**

- Supporting the programme and staff who want to volunteer as appropriate, including practicalities
- Facilitating access to appropriate briefing and training before the placement
- Offering UK-based supervision and other support for volunteers while they are overseas and debriefs on their return, including facility for critical reflection

**Factors to be addressed by both the NHS and host organisation:**

- Good quality links established between the NHS organisation and the host organisation
- Good systems of communication established between organisations and volunteers
- Appropriate briefings and training facilitated before the placement
- Appropriate funding for volunteers participating in the placement
- Evaluations during and after the placement to maximise benefits and mitigate harms

**Host organisation factors:**

- Appropriate quality and safety standards in place
- Appropriate support and supervision structure in place
- Objectives and plan for the placement agreed before it begins
- Commitment of local staff to the placement
- Agreement of focus of the project or placement that meets the needs of both the host country/organisation and the volunteer – including setting realistic objectives and mutual benefits to be achieved in the time available

Ultimately the research helps us to better understand the range of benefits that volunteering overseas can have for NHS staff and the organisations in which they work. It demonstrates that NHS organisations can strengthen the pathway for beneficial outcomes to be achieved by all stakeholders involved in international volunteering.