

# Working Internationally

A guide to humanitarian and development work for nurses and midwives





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# Foreword

## Lord Nigel Crisp

Brexit and other developments globally make it more important than ever that the UK builds strong relationships with countries around the world. What better way to do this could there be than through health? Every country aspires to improve the health of its people – regardless of politics, religion or ethnicity – and we all have a shared interest in global health issues from epidemic control to environmental change and sharing the benefits of scientific discovery.

Very many health workers already play a major role by working, often voluntarily, in low and middle income countries where they can use their skills and develop as people and professionals at the same time. They provide education and organisational support, help with advocacy, deliver health services and, sometimes equally importantly, give their own personal support and friendship to their peers working under great pressure in other countries. Health workers throughout the world share so much in terms of values, passion, commitment and aspirations. Their work is impressive and worthwhile – particularly when participants are well prepared and work in partnership with others. All of us want to know our work will make a difference and that our contribution will add to a wider effort and help local people grow, develop and create their own solutions. We all want to know that we have made a difference. In the end it will be local people who will have the biggest impact – “Africans will solve Africa’s problems” – but we can help.

I congratulate the four organisations producing this booklet. It provides valuable answers to the immediate questions that people thinking about working abroad will have. These organisations not only have great experience and expertise to contribute but also bring people together in a common endeavor with their colleagues at home and in other countries.

Finally, it is worth remembering that working abroad can also bring benefits back to the UK. Working in low and middle income countries, in particular, gives us all a new perspective on our own lives and offers us new ideas for the future. Our approach must be about respectful and equal co-development where we each have something to learn and each have something to teach – and can build the future together.



Nigel Crisp was Permanent Secretary of the UK Department of Health and Chief Executive of the NHS in England from 2000-2006. His latest book is *One World Health – an overview of global health*, CRC Press, 2016.

# Is this for me?

This booklet provides advice for nurses and midwives who want to work internationally, both in sustainable development and humanitarian programmes. It has been developed by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), the Royal College of Midwives (RCM), VSO and Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF).

As the impact of inequality, natural disasters, conflict and instability becomes increasingly globalised and spreads across borders, the UK health sector is increasingly engaged in global health. Many UK-based health professionals feel compelled to respond to increasing inequality and instability worldwide. As a result, professional organisations and humanitarian and development organisations in the UK receive many enquiries from nurses and midwives who want to get involved.

Whilst humanitarian emergency interventions frequently dominate media coverage, they are often only the initial stage of support to a population in crisis. This support can best be seen as a continuum, from the provision of humanitarian aid in an emergency through to sustainable development work to improve livelihoods, health, policy or education.

Nurses and midwives from the UK may be involved at all stages of this continuum. A professional nurse or midwife who is well prepared is a valuable asset to the global health community. However, well-meaning but poorly prepared professionals can be a liability both to themselves and to those they are trying to help.

This booklet discusses why, how and where UK based nurses or midwives can most effectively use their skills for humanitarian aid or development work overseas.

## Why are UK nurses and midwives needed overseas?

Countries all over the world try to maintain a balance between the population's health needs and the health system's ability to meet them. When this doesn't happen, the health system can become overstretched. It is in these situations that nurses and midwives from countries such as the UK can be of professional assistance—either to directly provide care for patients (in emergencies), or to build the capacity of the health system to cater to the needs of the population.

In the developing world, there are many regions or countries that have political stability but lack an adequate or fully functioning health service, often for the following reasons:

- There has been conflict and structures and systems have yet to be rehabilitated
- There is insufficient government revenue or political commitment for a functioning health service
- Populations live in such remote, hard to access places that local health services are unable to reach them.

In such situations, the poorest and most vulnerable often cannot access health care unless organisations intervene to create extra healthcare capacity.

Nurses and midwives are the largest body of health professionals in the world and often take on the role of health educators as well as providing clinical support. Universal health coverage, disease prevention and health promotion can be greatly improved by using the knowledge and skills of the UK- based nursing and midwifery professions.



### Case study: Zeenath Uddin

**Zeenath Uddin undertook capacity building with midwives in Uganda, where the healthcare system is developing and there is a shortage of skilled midwives leading to high mortality rates.**

*“I was losing my passion for midwifery in the UK because of the bureaucracy and box-ticking, so I volunteered to go out to Uganda to rekindle my love for the profession. The Royal College of Midwives has partnered with the Uganda Private Midwives Association to strengthen midwifery in Uganda. My role was to work with four private midwifery clinics, training trainers in emergency lifesaving skills for mothers and babies. I knew I had to be versatile, as people have different learning styles. I encouraged midwives to consider a change of positions for women in labour other than the supine position. I also introduced massage in labour as a form of pain relief, and taught examination and resuscitation of the newborn.”*

**Zeenath ensured that her training was as practical as possible, which helped the midwives to become confident in implementing their new skills:**

*“We did a lot of simulation training and they were very enthusiastic and passionate to learn. During my second week, I received an email from one of the midwives to whom I had taught new born resuscitation. She wrote: ‘Thank you so much for everything you taught us. A baby was born very flat and it wasn’t breathing; it was blue and needing full resuscitation. We went through all the steps you had taught us and then he survived.’*



*Prior to this, the midwives had no skills to resuscitate a baby effectively. I felt extremely humbled by this response and pleased to have been a part of changing the skills and behaviours of the midwives, so they were able to save one baby’s life, and hope that, together with input from other volunteers, we, as a team, are able to continue to contribute and aim to make childbirth in Uganda safer for mothers and their babies.”*

### What skills will I need?

Different organisations have different requirements for different postings. However, the following skills are generally desirable for most organisations:

- relevant professional experience and expertise
- experience of travelling overseas, especially in developing countries
- teamwork, tolerance and cross-cultural understanding
- management and organisational development skills
- experience of leading a team
- willingness and ability to train others
- ability to cope with stressful situations in challenging or low resource environments
- flexibility to adapt to rapid changes in circumstances
- language skills, especially French and Arabic

As you research different types of postings, you will gather information on what type of further qualifications might be useful, but the following are often particularly relevant:

- tropical health
- sexual and reproductive health
- paediatric care and neonatology
- counselling
- immunisation
- HIV/AIDS
- community health
- health visiting
- nutrition
- primary care
- management and leadership
- health promotion
- rehabilitation nursing
- operating theatre nursing
- emergency nursing
- care for sexual violence survivors
- midwifery.

### Adapting to the role

Many health care workers working overseas find it difficult to adjust to working in a new context. Resources are often far more limited than here in the UK, working cultures may differ significantly, and language and cultural barriers can be a challenge.

You may not have access to resources and medicines you often take for granted, such as running water, x-rays and ultrasounds, beds, private consultation rooms, mental health support for patients, episiotomy scissors and common medications.

For those working outside clinical contexts, nurses and midwives often experience frustration with different working cultures in their host organisations. For example, organisations may be more hierarchical than in the UK, staff may not agree to attend training without per diem payments, work may move at a slower pace than you are used to and stakeholder relationships may operate opaquely.

It is important to respect the people and community you are working with, to be flexible and willing to change your targets to suit the situation on the ground.



# Preparing for a mission

## Finding my first placement overseas

Opportunities for students and newly registered professionals can be hard to find, and some of the options are not always of high quality. If you are an inexperienced health care professional who wants to gain some insight or observational experience, then you may find that the best opportunities are found through NHS trusts, government programmes and organisations that arrange learning partnerships. Student midwives and nurses may also benefit from research opportunities to go abroad through their university.

Local UK charities and religious organisations may also be able to provide helpful advice. It is important to thoroughly research an organisation before working with them, particularly if the organisation charges participants for getting involved.

Depending on your individual circumstances, experience and the needs of the organisation, there are a wide range of roles for those with some nursing or midwifery experience, ranging from short to longer-term.

Short-term roles are more suitable for those with extensive international or humanitarian experience, and will often require local language skills, security and management training and a good understanding of the context and organisation.

Longer-term roles are frequently in development contexts, where you will have the time to settle in, build relationships, develop a good understanding of the community's needs and help build a longer-term strategy for their access to healthcare.

## Global health in the UK

There are a number of opportunities to work in global health that are based in the UK or have limited overseas travel. You could be working with refugees in the UK or even advising others working in overseas projects via Skype.

Some popular placements include:

- Working at UK based clinics for populations without access to healthcare in the UK (e.g. Médecins Du Monde)

- Virtual volunteering or mentoring such as telemedicine
- Consultancy opportunities to review overseas projects or develop policies
- Working as an advisor for an organisation such as DFID or the WHO

## Different types of sending organisations

The humanitarian and development sectors are made up of many different non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating from all around the world. They vary in size with some being affiliated to faith based or political movements, others being independent or secular or managed and led by diaspora groups.

Most organisations focus on specific areas, such as emergency medical relief, caring for victims of conflict, ongoing medical support and public health, famine and nutritional support, reconstruction/infrastructure support, and education and vocational training. It's important to choose an organisation that can use your unique skill set effectively and that matches your own personal beliefs.

MSF and VSO are examples of NGOs with contrasting approaches to providing medical support: one runs its own projects in response to crises; the other facilitates longer-term development through placements with host organisations.

Whichever approach you choose, it is important to understand the differences between the various NGOs and the role that each plays. Part of reaching your decision should involve carefully exploring the goals, purpose and philosophy of each organisation.

NGOs based on faith or a political stance often have certain expectations of their volunteers, such as daily worship or support of certain political beliefs. Usually, such NGOs recruit people who are already part of their communities.

You may also be able to find a posting that fits into a period of extended leave, or volunteer through a government programme so that you don't need to give up your job in the UK.



The UK Medical Education Database (UKMED) is maintained by the UK government. By joining the UK-Med Community of Practice, healthcare workers committed to emergency humanitarian response can be recruited, developed and trained to respond at times of crisis and conflict.

Increasingly there are opportunities to participate in health partnerships through the NHS and universities as well as professional associations such as RCN, RCM, RCOG, RCPCH.

You could also research the partnerships established by local, regional and UK government bodies, such as:

- Wales for Africa programme: [gov.wales/topics/international/walesforafrica/?lang=en](http://gov.wales/topics/international/walesforafrica/?lang=en)
- Scotland's partnerships with countries in Africa and South Asia: [www.gov.scot/Topics/International/int-dev](http://www.gov.scot/Topics/International/int-dev)
- The Coalition of Aid and Development Agencies NI: <http://cada-ni.org/> or the NI charity Serve: <http://www.serve.ie/>
- The Tropical Health and Education Trust's 'Principles of Partnership' <http://www.thet.org/pops/principles-of-partnership>





### Case study: Emma Pedley

**Nurse Emma Pedley travelled to Nepal in the wake of the massive earthquakes in 2015 which killed more than 9,000 people and injured a further 22,000. Every day she travelled by helicopter to isolated villages in the Himalayas with a team of medical and logistical staff to run mobile clinics.**

*“The days out in the mountain villages have been simultaneously exhilarating – first time in a helicopter! – and yet a saddening and sobering experience. Many villages in the area to the northeast of Kathmandu have been almost entirely flattened, with stone houses and animal shelters destroyed, and people’s precious food and grain stores buried under rubble. Despite the hardships they are facing, people have met us with overwhelming welcome and generosity – smiling and ‘Namaste-ing’ to us, offering us tea from their scant reserves during our longer clinics.*

*I’ve been to so many villages now, maybe 25 in a just a few days of doing clinics, but there are some small fragments of stories that really stand out in my memory. A shy, bright-eyed nurse whose health post had been crushed, taking her medical supplies with it, and who had scavenged enough things to do only a few small treatments since, who was delighted to receive a big bucket full of basic drugs and dressing*

*materials which would enable her to treat her community more effectively. The rumple-faced old man who knelt, gnarled hands to the ground, chanting “Ram, Ram, Ram” (“God, God, God”) when a strong aftershock shook the terraced field we were standing on, and stayed kneeling for many minutes afterwards, clearly deeply traumatised by the reliving of the initial quake.*

*There is hardly time to process all of this at the time. It’s hard to run a mobile clinic out of the side door of a helicopter like a bizarre car boot sale, rummaging in boxes for drugs, listening to our Nepali doctor’s translations of sicknesses and symptoms, triaging and trying to do crowd control all simultaneously. It’s an intense and distracting business.*

*The two pressing priorities on the mind of the communities we have visited are shelter and food, in that order. Already it is raining heavily every few days. By the end of May this will become every day and the weather conditions then will make regular helicopter flights impossible. Our current goal is to assess as many of these communities as fast as we can before this happens. Our logistics team is working overtime to follow in the footsteps of our medical teams to distribute huge quantities of blankets, shelter kits, hygiene kits and high energy biscuits before the change in seasons. My only hope is that we can reach everyone who needs it in time.”*

### Royal College of Nursing (RCN)

Since 1916, the Royal College of Nursing has been supporting nurses and promoting the vital work of nursing staff. It has evolved into the largest professional nursing association and union in the world, with more than 435,000 nurse, midwife, health care assistants and student members.

The RCN's International Department works closely with UK, European and wider international alliances and stakeholders to influence health and nursing policy and practice globally. The RCN's international development work focuses on strengthening national nursing associations to represent their nurse members, contribute to policy making, and promote excellence in practice.

The RCN has a range of resources for nurses embarking on work or volunteering placements overseas, including an online community, the RCN International Nursing Network Facebook group, as well as online guides focusing on the practical aspects of overseas work from visas and work permits, to revalidation and professional indemnity advice.

### VSO

VSO is an international development charity working to tackle poverty through skilled, experienced volunteers. Founded in 1958 it is the leading independent volunteering organisation, focusing on long-term, sustainable development.

Volunteers work in some of the world's poorest communities in 26 countries across Africa, Asia and the Pacific. VSO roles are usually one to two years, but roles of six months and less are increasingly available for highly experienced professionals.

VSO volunteers support local colleagues to develop their skills enabling them to achieve their priorities. Volunteers work with and for VSO partner organisations who request their help. Partners range from Ministries of Health to rural mission hospitals. All nursing and midwifery roles involve on-the-job training and mentoring of colleagues. Some roles involve classroom teaching and curriculum development for degree courses, helping develop the next generation of nurses or midwives.



### Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)

MSF was founded in 1971 and is focused on bringing medical relief to victims of war, disasters and epidemics wherever the need is greatest. This means that MSF frequently operates in regions that are considered high risk – the organisation is often seen as being “first in-last out”.

However, MSF also has extensive operations in places where an inadequate local health service, local politics or difficult terrain mean that diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria or HIV/AIDS are left untreated. Without clinics set up by organisations like MSF, these populations would have no access to life-saving health care.

MSF’s mandate includes ‘witnessing’ as well as medical care, and so MSF impartially speaks out about what its teams see during their work in the field. They often are the ones to raise the alarm when diseases such as Ebola spread, famine affects a region or war crimes occur, stepping in to intervene and handing over the project to the government or another NGO when the ‘emergency’ phase is past.

The people who work with MSF come from a range of backgrounds, and most do 9-12 month missions in the field, though experienced staff may do shorter missions in emergency contexts.

### Royal College of Midwives (RCM)

As one of the oldest midwifery associations in the world, the RCM is the voice for midwives in the United Kingdom (UK). Many of its members are actively engaged in global midwifery and the RCM’s expertise aims to support the development of the profession of midwifery globally to ensure sustainable development for all. The RCM’s expertise lies in being a professional association representing midwives and advocating for midwifery, and in this role works to contribute to the development of global midwifery in the following ways:

- advocacy on behalf of women and midwives to UN agencies, NGOs and governments
- representation of its members and activities in global organisations
- providing technical expertise and capacity building through inter-professional partnerships and partner midwifery associations
- consultancy for other midwifery associations, facilitating international exchanges and the accreditation of learning programmes for midwives
- supporting members by providing advice and opportunities for engagement in global work and supporting international members with educational resources and support.



### What might I be doing?

Working for a humanitarian aid or development organisation can enable you to support health care systems and provision almost anywhere in the developing world.

You could be training local staff so they continue to benefit from your experience for years to come, or assisting local managers in setting up durable and sustainable healthcare infrastructure.

Alternatively, you could be part of the response team in an emergency, or travelling around a country from project to project reaching out to isolated and neglected communities.

### Where will I work?

You work could vary hugely, as could your location. You may work in a small village health clinic, with Ministry of Health officials in the capital city working on national health policy, or providing virtual support such as ‘telemedicine’.

You might be working directly for a large international organisation that runs its own projects, such as UNICEF, Save the Children or MSF. Alternatively, you may be matched by a ‘sending organisation’ such as VSO or the Royal College of Midwives to support a healthcare facility or programme that needs experienced nurses or midwives to train and support staff.



### Am I ready for this?

Whilst the motivation to help others is admirable, it is important that you consider your commitments at home before taking the decision to work overseas for any extended period of time. Some questions you may need to consider are:

- Can my family manage at home without me, even if I am not able to be in frequent contact?
- Can any financial commitments I have be honoured whilst I am away?
- Am I motivated to do this because I want to help others, or am I just trying to get away from a situation at home?
- Can my professional registration be kept up to date whilst I am abroad?
- Am I able to make arrangements to come back to life at home (work, house, family)?





### Case study: Gilbert Mandira and Chris Holt

For as long as he can remember, student Gilbert Mandira had wanted to work in a hospital. As the son of a doctor, Gilbert frequently observed people in his community seeking treatment at his father's clinic. Witnessing children die from illnesses like malaria and the distress that it caused instilled in Gilbert the passion to become a qualified nurse. Inspired by his father, Gilbert became a student nurse at Nkhoma College of Nursing, Malawi, near the capital city of Lilongwe.

Gilbert is one of several trainee nurses that Chris trained at Nkhoma College of Nursing. During his 1 year placement Chris has taught medication administration, paediatric life support and introduced a learning tool that reminds students to check patients' vital signs, as well as promoting cleanliness and nutrition for patients. He said "Students in the UK are supported a lot and have maybe one mentor to two students. Here we have anything from 15-20 students to one mentor."

One of the skills that Chris noticed students struggled with was inserting IV lines. Without

proper training in skin preparation and infection control, they were putting patients at risk of infection. He decided to make it a key area of focus for training, and conducted clinical skills sessions to help students translate their theoretical knowledge into practical skills on the ward. On discovering an unused prosthetic cannula training arm in a cupboard, he used it to train students to insert an IV line safely. Gilbert has found practicing the skill with the prosthetic arm particularly helpful. "At first I used to fail and fail, but practicing on a model has really helped me to learn. Now I can do it on real patients, and it feels good to achieve this."

Working in an environment with limited equipment was challenging for Chris, though he found the experience of working with student nurses hugely rewarding. There was a 100% pass rate for all students after a year of training with Chris. He remarked, "I am delighted their nursing skills have improved – but especially happy to see how the students are approaching patients in a much more professional manner than before." The nursing students that graduate from Nkhoma College will be posted all across the country when they complete training. In Chris' words, "Ultimately I'm hoping that these skills will save lives."



## What are the benefits and risks?

### The benefits

Working overseas as a nurse or midwife can benefit you in many different ways. It is likely that you will have more responsibility than in the UK, and you may be required to make decisions and clinical judgements in isolation. This may help you to become very resourceful and more confident in your decision making capabilities.

You may learn about new areas of healthcare, such as sanitation, tropical medicine, fistula care, or malnutrition. You may also learn how to manage a team and build cross cultural communication skills, as well as learning about new cultures and countries. Whatever your role, you will have the satisfaction of seeing your skills improve individuals' and communities' access to quality health care

Time spent working overseas will also add a great deal of value to your work in the UK, as you will have developed skills that will be transferable to the UK context, perhaps with refugee and migrant communities or in healthcare policy development.

### The risks

Although there are many personal rewards and professional development opportunities, there are many challenging aspects to the work too.

Considering the scale of humanitarian aid work being delivered every day across the world, in many challenging and dangerous places, serious incidents and death of aid workers are still uncommon. However, by the very nature of the job and the operating locations, there are many more risks associated with humanitarian work than are found in most jobs. These include exposure to tropical diseases, exposure to the dangers of war, risk of serious injury through travel accidents and risk of violence, abduction, rape or even death through conflict or terrorism.

It is important to thoroughly research the organisations to which you are considering applying and the regions you expect to work in and think about whether the risks are acceptable to you before confirming your participation. It is also important to stay within your scope of practice to protect your professional registration when working overseas.

### What do I need to learn before I go?

In order to be able to offer relevant support it is important to carry out research to understand the specific needs of the project you will be working on, as well as the history of the context you will be working in. The following may be useful:

- humanitarian protocols can be found on the Sphere Project website
- the organisation you will be working with should provide you with a report on the project as well as a job description
- blogs of individuals with relevant experience can provide up to date information on particular areas and specialities.
- contact your professional association (RCN, RCM) for advice or introduction to other members who have worked in this field.

It is essential that you prepare contextually appropriate training or mentoring materials if this will part of your role. Undertake some research to understand the community you are working with and what essential skills may be needed. Be flexible and take as many resources as you can with you – your priorities and those of the local healthcare workers may be different. Research global tools and resources rather than simply taking along what you use at home. Many UN agencies or NGOs have developed contextually appropriate guidelines, manuals, modules and resources, such as:

- WHO produces guidelines and manuals for different specialities:  
<http://www.who.int/publications>
- The International Confederation of Midwives produce midwifery specific global standards, competencies and tools:  
<http://www.internationalmidwives.org/what-we-do/global-standards-competencies-and-tools.html>
- Medical Aid Films make health promotion and skills videos in a range of different languages: <http://www.medicalaidfilms.org/>
- A video game addressing maternal mortality in rural communities can be downloaded from [www.hofmab.com](http://www.hofmab.com)

### Learn a little of the language

This will not only help you in your interactions with staff and patients, but it will also endear you to the local community as they will appreciate the effort you are making! There are a number of online, There are a number of online and in-person courses run from the UK.

Whilst you can expect that your sending organisation will give you some preparatory training, it is always a good idea to learn as much as you can before you go away. These organisations specialise in the training needs of humanitarian and development workers:





## Training

- Various courses at the London and Liverpool Schools of Tropical Medicine
- MSF Global Health and Humanitarian Medicine course
- Margaret Pyke Trust Maternal, Infant & Sexual and Reproductive Health in the Developing World course
- Security training, for example with RedR.
- Various leadership and project management courses, both online and in-person.

A number of universities provide higher degrees and short courses in tropical medicine, public health, humanitarian aid and international development. Members of certain professional bodies such as the Royal College of Midwives or Royal Society of Medicine can access online modules specifically for those working in Global Health.

## What should I expect?

Most people who enter the world of humanitarian aid and development work do so out of compassion. They see suffering in the news or on their travels, and they feel compelled to do something about it. This compassion can also make this kind of work harrowing, and so you should be well prepared for what you may encounter before working overseas.

It is important to ensure that you are emotionally and mentally ready to start working in this sector before making the commitment. Some organisations assess applicants carefully to ensure that they are suited to this kind of work before employing them, but others may not. It is therefore important to be sure within yourself that you are able to cope with the stresses you are likely to encounter in the field.

In **development** projects you will face the challenge of dealing with complex hierarchies and social networks. If you are on a long term posting, you will face the emotional challenges of being far away from home for a long time, but you will also have the chance to create a local social support network in the project. You may be in a relatively stable context, and so support systems may already exist if you need them.

In **humanitarian aid** projects, you are likely to work and live in very close proximity with your team, share very basic accommodation and your movements may be quite restricted. The pace of work is likely to be much more intense,

and you may encounter violence and trauma. However, you are more likely to be working in an international team of people who are all encountering the same things, and this can be a great support and motivation.

## Adapting to a new culture

The way you work will not only be affected by the organisation you work for, but also the context in which you are working.

During your time overseas you will be expected to behave in a way that is respectful to the local cultural norms of the place where you work. This may include:

- wearing appropriate clothing
- learning some words in the local language
- adhering to security protocols (e.g. being confined to a compound in conflict zones, observing curfews)
- being aware that you may be treated differently because of your gender or age
- being guided by local colleagues in cultural matters
- avoiding speaking about certain subjects (for example politics or religion) that you are used to discussing openly
- adapting your working and management style
- changing the way you teach to make it locally appropriate and easily understandable.

## Health and wellbeing overseas

Humanitarian and development work can be very rewarding and fulfilling, but it can also take a toll on your physical and mental health. Extensive travel and long working hours can put stress on your body, and you may be working in an area where you are exposed to new diseases such as malaria, dengue or parasitological infections, or may be at greater risk of physical or sexual violence.

It is vital that you have a full health assessment before and after you travel to ensure that you are fully vaccinated, have malaria prophylaxis if needed, and that you do not have any latent infections when you come home. If you feel unwell overseas, you must seek healthcare promptly as it could be serious, and may take longer to reach a hospital if needed.

Most large organisations provide medical and psycho-social support for their staff during and after their mission, but if you work with a smaller organisation that does not have this support

system, it is advisable to identify an organisation that can support you in this way before going overseas.

Following are some useful contacts:

- **Interhealth UK** specialises in care for development and humanitarian workers, and is widely used by large NGOs in the UK
- **Headspace** is a useful mindfulness app that is endorsed and used by many humanitarian NGOs
- **The Huntingdon Institute** was developed by specialist psychologists to provide support for humanitarian workers, and has free self-care e-resources and courses

In addition to seeking care when you need it when working overseas, it is important to do what you can to prevent yourself from falling ill by:

- giving yourself time to settle in and understand your new context
- not working more than 9 hours a day
- ensuring you take at least one day off every week
- making sure you take your medication regularly
- reserving plenty of time for social interaction
- ensuring that you receive any security briefings and training you will need to ensure that you stay safe.

## Coming home

Humanitarian and development workers often find that they seem to cope well with contextual stressors (sounds of gunfire, patient load, distressing patient stories, etc.) whilst in the field, but that they find it very hard to return home after their mission as they have ‘normalised’ the world they have been working in. During this return phase, people often find it hard to make decisions, feel numb, get frustrated with western priorities and can feel a little disorientated.

This is a normal part of the experience and ‘reverse culture shock’ is a recognised issue for overseas workers. It is important to ensure that you have a strong support network, accommodation and a plan for when you come home, as well as adequate time to debrief with your sending organisation.

Keep an eye out for symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress if you have encountered a traumatic situation, or persistent signs of mental ill-health such as ongoing anxiety or depression. These can often be easily treated if you seek help promptly.



# Practicalities

## Will there be any remuneration?

Traditionally, people involved in humanitarian work did so in an unpaid, voluntary capacity. Some organisations still use the term ‘volunteer’ – but nowadays it can mean different things to different organisations.

Many of the larger professional humanitarian and development organisations recognise that in order to attract high quality personnel and to retain them for more than one posting, then they must provide financial compensation. Most have a basic remuneration structure which usually increases with experience, as well as providing a ‘Per Diem’ allowance to cover expenses in-country. Most of these positions require a higher degree of experience and commitment from their personnel.

However, there are some organisations that pay only a basic cost of living allowance or a day rate based on local living expenses. Many of these are smaller NGOs, and some even ask their volunteers to fundraise to cover their work and accommodation costs.

## Working when you return

Nurses and midwives who have worked in the humanitarian and development sectors strongly recommend planning where you will work when you return. If you have left your job to work overseas, it may be a good idea to look into bank nursing/agencies and register with one so that when you return you can move easily back into working in the UK.

You may also want to check what paperwork you will need from your work overseas in order to

comply with requirements for revalidation and Continuing Professional Development, and to notify your sending organisation of this before you leave.

## Continuing Professional Development

Working with an NGO can be a one-off experience or a career choice, depending on your situation. For some, one posting is all they can commit to for family, financial or other reasons. Others embark on a lifetime of humanitarian work, whilst most alternate between a regular clinical job in the UK and periods of overseas work.

Most people first start humanitarian and development work in roles such as project nurse, midwife or clinical teacher. With more experience, you can move into leadership roles such as Medical Co-ordinator or Head of Mission. This experience can also lead to opportunities to work for large international organisations such as the World Health Organization as well as management roles in the NHS or advisory roles in large international NGO headquarters.

International work can certainly contribute to professional development but you will need to inform the NMC of your current address, maintain your registration and revalidate this regularly. You will find details about this process at: <http://revalidation.nmc.org.uk/welcome-to-revalidation>

The RCN has also published guidance for members interested in working overseas at: <https://www.rcn.org.uk/get-help/rcn-advice/working-overseas>





### Strengthening a professional association with RCN

**Professor Jane Reid has worked with projects in Zambia since 2004, first with Friends of Africa to provide clinical training and support, and more recently with the RCN-Zambian Union of Nurses Organisation (ZUNO) partnership project in Zambia which focuses on strengthening the voice of nursing in Zambia, with emphasis on developing leadership and advocacy skills.**

As a senior nurse with significant experience in acute care, as well as international healthcare development, Jane worked with Zambia's University Teaching Hospital (UTH) where she supported ZUNO to train multidisciplinary teams in the implementation of the WHO safe surgery

checklist. She initially intensively mentored ZUNO staff until they were able to carry out the training in-house. She found a lot of similarities between ZUNO and her own association, the RCN, back home, noting that nurses in both countries shared similar challenges.

Jane's seniority gave the project invaluable knowledge and gravitas, and her belief in the power of strong nursing associations has inspired ZUNO and improved their visibility and influence in the Zambian health sector. She says of her work with ZUNO:

"The partnership between ZUNO and the RCN provides a crucial platform to learn from and support one another. It has been my pleasure to volunteer and facilitate the next steps that will create positive outcomes of the partnership, going forward."

### What will be the impact on my career?

One of the barriers to being involved in work overseas is the difficulty of being released from employment or finding employment on return.

Some employers may keep your job open whilst you are away so that you can return straight back to work. For example, NHS Scotland and VSO developed a ground-breaking partnership in 2006 which gave NHS staff the opportunity to work in Africa and retain job security, pension and employment benefits back in Scotland.

You are advised to seek advice from your professional association about what you can expect from your employers and how to negotiate terms and conditions of service with them.

Working overseas can have a positive effect on your career but it can also benefit your colleagues back home and your patients too. The following documents have been developed to demonstrate this:

**Department of Health** ‘The Framework for NHS Involvement in International Development’ <http://www.thet.org/health-partnership-scheme/resources/the-framework-for-nhs-involvement-in-international-development-1>

**Health Education England** wrote about how working overseas can offer real benefits to the NHS <https://hee.nhs.uk/printpdf/our-work/attracting-recruiting/improving-care-volunteering-abroad>

‘Engaging in Global Health’ reiterates the UK government’s commitment to international partnerships: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/352928/Engaging\\_in\\_Global\\_Health\\_1\\_.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/352928/Engaging_in_Global_Health_1_.pdf)

When overseas you may need to register as a nurse/midwife in that country. Speak to your organisation about how to go about doing this. Large NGOs will usually arrange work permits and registration in the country where you will work.

### Summary

As health care professionals in the UK, we are fortunate that we live in an affluent and politically stable country. However, there are many societies and individuals across the world who do not enjoy the same rights to health and have little or no access to health care.

There will always be a need for experienced UK nurses and midwives to share their knowledge and skills, whether it is by providing expert help in ongoing disaster relief or by helping to build capacity through development work. Such work also provides opportunities for UK health care professionals to learn about issues that affect those in crisis or poverty, understand how health systems grow and evolve, and to bring those skills back to work in the UK.

This guide sets out some of the things you will need to think about when you are looking at working internationally and how best to prepare yourself. With some planning and discussion, you should be able to match your skills and aspirations to a relevant organisation to help deliver high quality humanitarian aid, or support sustainable development.

One of the fundamental tasks facing you if you are thinking about working in humanitarian aid or development is to make sure you are adequately informed, prepared and trained before you start work. If you are thinking about moving into this field, your next task is to start intensive research and learning so that you can ensure that you find the right organisation and project for your skills and background.



# Useful Contacts

## Action Against Hunger

1st Floor  
161-163 Greenwich High Road  
London SE10 8JA  
Tel: +44 (0)20 8293 6190  
Email: [info@aahuk.org](mailto:info@aahuk.org)  
<https://www.actionagainsthunger.org.uk>

## British Red Cross Society

UK Office  
44 Moorfields  
London EC2Y 9AL  
Tel: 0344 871 11 11  
From overseas: + 44 2071 3879 00  
Fax: 020 7562 2000  
Textphone: 020 7562 2050  
Email: [information@redcross.org.uk](mailto:information@redcross.org.uk)  
[www.redcross.org.uk](http://www.redcross.org.uk)

## Christian Aid

PO Box 100, London SE1 7RT.  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7620 4444  
[www.christian-aid.org.uk](http://www.christian-aid.org.uk)

## Church Mission Society

Watlington Road  
Oxford OX4 6BZ  
Tel: +44 (0)1865 787400  
Email: [info@churchmissionsociety.org](mailto:info@churchmissionsociety.org)  
[www.cms-uk.org](http://www.cms-uk.org)

## Concern

13/14 Calico House  
Clove Hitch Quay  
London SW11 3TN  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7801 1850 (London office)  
+44 (0)2890 331100 (Belfast office)  
[www.concern.net](http://www.concern.net)

## Doctors of the World UK (DOW UK)/

**Medicins du Monde UK**  
(formerly known as Médecins du Monde UK)  
29th Floor, 1 Canada Square,  
London E14 5AA  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7267 5789  
[www.doctorsoftheworld.org.uk](http://www.doctorsoftheworld.org.uk)

## Emergency

Via Gerolamo Vida 11  
20127 Milano  
Tel: +39 02 881 881  
Fax: +39 02 863 163 36  
Email: [info@emergency.it](mailto:info@emergency.it)  
[www.emergency.it](http://www.emergency.it)

## UK office:

Can Mezzanine 49-51 East Road  
Old Street, London, N1 6AH  
Tel: +44 (0) 333 340 6411  
Tel: +44 (0) 207 250 8302  
Fax: +44 (0) 333 340 6499  
[www.emergencyuk.org](http://www.emergencyuk.org)  
[info@emergencyuk.org](mailto:info@emergencyuk.org)

## Goal UK

1-10 Praed Mews,  
London, W2 1QY  
Tel: +44 (0) 20 3481 1314  
Fax: +44 (0)20 7631 3197  
Email: [infouk@uk.goal.ie](mailto:infouk@uk.goal.ie)  
<https://www.goalglobal.org/>

## Health Poverty Action

(formerly known as Health Unlimited)  
Ground Floor, 31-33 Bondway  
London SW8 1SJ  
Tel: +44 (0)207 840 3777  
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7840 3770  
Email: [general@healthpovertyaction.org](mailto:general@healthpovertyaction.org)  
[www.healthunlimited.org](http://www.healthunlimited.org)

## Health Action Partnership International

12 Burnley Road, London SW9 0SH  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7095 8292  
<http://www.hapi.org.uk/about-us/partners/ihlc/?vAction=fntUp>

## International Service

5 Rougier Street,  
York, YO1 6HZ, UK  
Tel: +44 (0) 1904 647799  
Fax: +44 (0) 1904 65 23 53  
Email: [contact@internationalservice.org.uk](mailto:contact@internationalservice.org.uk)  
[www.internationalservice.org.uk](http://www.internationalservice.org.uk)

**International Voluntary Service (IVS)**

IVS GB, Thorn House, 5 Rose Street,  
Edinburgh, EH2 2PR

Tel: +44 (0) 131 243 2745  
Email: [info@ivsgb.org](mailto:info@ivsgb.org)  
[www.ivsgb.org](http://www.ivsgb.org)

**Medical Aid for Palestinians**

33a Islington Park Street  
London N1 1QB

Tel: +44 (0)20 7226 4114  
Email: [info@map-uk.org](mailto:info@map-uk.org)  
[www.map-uk.org](http://www.map-uk.org)

**Médecins Sans Frontières UK**

Lower Ground Floor  
Chancery Exchange  
10, Furnival St  
London EC4A 1AB

Tel: +44 (0)207 404 6600  
Fax: +44 (0)207 404 4466  
Email: [office-ldn@london.msf.org](mailto:office-ldn@london.msf.org)  
[www.msf.org.uk](http://www.msf.org.uk)

**Oxfam**

UK Office  
Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley  
Oxford OX4 2JY

Tel: 0300 200 1292  
From overseas: +44 (0) 1865 47 3727  
Email: [information@redcross.org.uk](mailto:information@redcross.org.uk)  
[www.oxfam.org.uk](http://www.oxfam.org.uk)

**Raleigh International**

Third Floor, Dean Bradley House  
52 Horseferry Road  
London SW1P 2AF

Tel: +44 (0)20 7183 1270  
Email: [info@raleighinternational.org](mailto:info@raleighinternational.org)  
[www.raleighinternational.org.uk](http://www.raleighinternational.org.uk)

**The Royal College of Midwives**

15, Mansfield St  
London W1G 9NH,

Tel: 0300 303 0444  
From overseas: +44 (0)207 3123 535  
<https://www.rcm.org.uk/gmtp/global>

**Royal College of Nursing**

20 Cavendish Square  
London W1G 0RN

Tel: +44 (0) 345 456 3996  
From overseas: +44 207 647 3456  
Email: [international@rcn.org.uk](mailto:international@rcn.org.uk)  
<https://www.rcn.org.uk/get-help/rcn-advice/working-overseas>

**The Salvation Army**

101 Newington Causeway,  
London,  
SE1 6BN

Tel: +44 (0)207 367 4500  
Email: [websa@salvationarmy.org](mailto:websa@salvationarmy.org)  
<http://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/>

**Save the Children**

1 St. John's Lane  
London EC1M 4AR

Tel: +44 (0)20 7012 6400  
Email: [supporter.care@savethechildren.org.uk](mailto:supporter.care@savethechildren.org.uk)  
[www.savethechildren.org.uk](http://www.savethechildren.org.uk)

**THET (Tropical Health and Education Trust)**

1 Wimpole Street (5th Floor)  
London W1G 0AE

Tel: +44 (0)20 7290 3892  
Fax: +44 (0)20 7290 3890  
Email: [info@thet.org](mailto:info@thet.org)  
[www.thet.org](http://www.thet.org)

**United Nations Volunteers**

Postfach 260 111  
D-53153 BONN, Germany

Tel: +49 228 815 2000  
Fax: +49 228-815 2001  
Email: [information@unvolunteers.org](mailto:information@unvolunteers.org)

**VSO**

100 London Road,  
Kingston-Upon-Thames, KT2 6QJ,

Tel: +44 (0)20 8780 7500  
Email: [enquiry@vso.org.uk](mailto:enquiry@vso.org.uk)  
[www.vso.org.uk](http://www.vso.org.uk)

**Useful websites:**

<http://www.sphereproject.org/>  
<https://www.uk-med.org>



The RCN represents nurses and nursing, promotes  
excellence in practice and shapes health policies

RCN Online  
[www.rcn.org.uk](http://www.rcn.org.uk)

RCN Direct  
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