

Preparing for Change; Guidance for Doctors Going Abroad and Returning to UK

Working overseas is a valuable and enriching experience. It is an opportunity to contribute to healthcare in low and middle-income countries (LMIC) and also an opportunity to gain experience and skills that will add to your professional development and benefit the NHS when you return. The government's paper [*Engaging in Global Health*](#) (2014) calls for overseas experience to be seen as the norm and not the exception, and for employers and professional associations to support staff wanting to go.

However in practice, making preparations to go, and also to leave the door open to return, can be daunting. This paper highlights professional issues that are important for maintaining your career, as well as some of the personal issues that are important for living in a LMIC. Professional issues will differ for those in different specialties and at different levels of training, so this paper does not attempt to provide specific details, but rather to be a checklist of areas to consider. The guidance is aimed at doctors working abroad for more than a few months, however those planning shorter visits may also find some of the points helpful.

The processes of leaving and returning are both challenging, but God goes with us on the journey and gives us opportunities to serve Him wherever we are. As one chapter of our lives closes, another one opens; farewells and endings lead to fresh horizons and new beginnings.

Preparing to Go

Keeping up to date

Whether or not you expect to return to work in the UK, you should plan to be keeping up to date while away. Do you need to arrange an online subscription to any journals? Have you found out what e-learning resources there are in your specialty? How do other people at the same place stay up to date? Have you asked their advice about conferences and courses to attend? Is there a journal club or patient review meeting, or might you set one up?

Have you contacted your Royal College to tell them your plans see what help and support they may be able to offer when you are away and when you return? They will have a committee or officer responsible for international involvement.

Keeping records

Whether or not you are maintaining a licence to practise, it's good to keep records of what you do. Have you considered how you will document this evidence, and your other activities, while away? Are you aware of on-line toolkits to help with this? In addition to

your clinical work and CPD activity, you should document the teaching and administration that you do. Collect statistics and review the cases you see. Health Education England's International Office has produced a [Volunteer Toolkit](#) to enable participants in international health projects to provide NHS employers with examples of their professional development. It provides a framework to collect evidence about knowledge and skills gained overseas.

Revalidation

Do you want to maintain a licence to practise while you are away? If you can maintain a connection to a Designated Body in the UK, you can revalidate through that. Some doctors manage to arrange an honorary contract with a hospital trust, or ongoing work for a GP surgery when home on leave. Alternatively you can revalidate directly through the GMC using the [Annual Returns Route](#). A third option is to find a GMC-approved '[Suitable Person](#)' who can oversee your revalidation, but this is difficult to arrange. There are details about these options in the *Revalidation Briefing*.

Relinquishing your licence to practise

If you are away for longer than a year, maintaining a licence to practise is very difficult unless you have an on-going connection to a designated Body. You can [relinquish your licence](#) and restore it again when you return by presenting three documents: a Certificate of Good Standing (CGS) from the country where you have been working, a reference from your employer and your passport. This is usually straightforward but sometimes there can be difficulties obtaining a CGS. Find out from doctors who are there whether there is likely to be a problem with this and inform the GMC at an early stage. There is more information in the *Revalidation Briefing*.

GP performers' list

If you are a GP, you will be removed from the Performers' List if you are away for more than 24 months. To be re-instated you will need to sit exams and undergo a period of supervised practice – a lengthy and costly process (see [GP National Recruitment Office](#).) So if you are planning to be away for about two years, you may want to make sure you come back before the 24 month deadline.

Registration in your host country

Do you know what is required for medical registration in the country where you are going? What kind of work permit will you need? Who will arrange this? Can it be done on arrival or should you arrange it before you go? Check with your host employer/organisation exactly what documents are needed. You will need a Certificate of Good Standing from the GMC. You can request this online and it will be sent directly from the GMC to the regulatory body in your host country. You may need birth/marriage certificates and a police report in addition to academic and professional certificates. Are original documents required, or can

you take notarised copies? A local intermediary helping in advance is usually preferable to sending documents directly to host medical councils/ministries. Start early; bureaucracy takes time. Do you need to make arrangements for your spouse as well?

Medical indemnity

Arranging indemnity cover is becoming more difficult. Contact your receiving organisation to check the level of cover you will need; some hospitals give cover through their own insurance. The MPS has a 'Humanitarian Volunteer' subscription rate but this only covers certain kinds of work, so make enquiries.

Keeping in contact

Have you arranged for contact with GMC and other bodies to be by email rather than post? If you are maintaining a UK address whilst overseas, have you arranged someone to check and forward important mail? If they open it and email or scan the contents before posting, it will prevent important information being lost in the post. Consider setting up a royal mail redirection for the first year – it's easy to forget to change your address on some things.

Subscriptions

Have you contacted the GMC, the BMA and your Royal College to find out if you qualify for reduced / free subscriptions whilst overseas? CMF membership is free for those working in resource-poor settings, so don't forget to tell us when you move!

Pensions

Have you asked for your NHS Pension to be frozen if you are not going to be paying into it for some time? Have you considered speaking with an independent financial advisor about the best way to manage this if you return to a different job?

National Christian medical association

Is there a national Christian medical association in your host country? Connecting with a national fellowship is a good way to meet local doctors and students. Find contacts through the [International Christian Medical and Dental Association](#)

Personal Issues

1. Have you thought about how prayer and support from your church and Christian friends will work whilst you are overseas? Whether or not you are being officially 'sent' by your church as a mission partner, it is important to have their support and to be in touch with them.

2. Do you have a defined group of key supporters that you can contact at any time whilst you are away? It is important that you have support and prayer from key people whom you know well and can trust.
3. Have you planned and communicated with friends and church how you aim to be in touch from overseas? Are you planning to write a newsletter, a blog or to use facebook?
4. Are there Bible studies, Christian books, music and other resources that you could take with you in case finding teaching and fellowship is difficult where you are going?
5. If you are going with a mission agency, are the relationships clear between them, yourself, your church and personal supporters? Is there anything you need to do to improve things?
6. Are you planning for the needs of your spouse? If s/he does not have a defined role, the transition can be very hard. Look in advance for social groups or voluntary work s/he can be a part of, or think how s/he will spend their time if they are not working.
7. Are you planning for the needs of your children while you are overseas? Have you had advice from others who have had children in the place where you are going, to find out what is available? Are there arrangements you need to make for parents and other family members whom you are leaving behind?
8. Are you planning to learn the local language when you arrive? Speaking some of the local language is always appreciated but how much time you give for this will depend on the setting you will be in. If you want to learn more than the basics, ask your host to identify a teacher and allow some protected time for study if possible.
9. Have you made arrangements for any long-term medication or on-going healthcare you will need? Do you need to take with you a course of HIV Post-Exposure Prophylaxis so that you have rapid access if you are at risk? Have you arranged an adequate supply of anti-malarials if you need them? [Interhealth](#) in London and [Healthlink 360](#) in Edinburgh are organisations that exist to help people working in LMIC stay healthy, providing consultations, advice and supplies.
10. Do you need to arrange health insurance while away? This is advisable unless it is covered by your sending organisation, or you are working in a country that has reciprocal arrangements with the UK for free health care. You may need to cover the cost of medical evacuation in an emergency; if you can't travel in a normal airplane seat or need medical assistance during the flight, it will cost over \$50 000.
11. Primary care in the NHS is free for everyone. Eligibility for free secondary care is determined by whether or not a person is 'Ordinarily resident' in UK. This is explained in *Access to NHS Care*.

12. Have you made all the necessary arrangements for any properties you own? Who will take care of this while you are away? (Rental agency, friends/family) Do you need to arrange new insurance policies?
13. Have you made a will?
14. Are there any issues that require closure before going overseas; things that need to be said, relationships that need to be mended?

Preparing to Return

Returning from overseas can be challenging, and many people find it hard to reacclimatise to life in their 'home' culture. Some of the issues encountered by returners are summarised in an article from [Triple Helix](#)

It can be difficult to fit back into the system; either 'things' have moved on or you have moved on, so nothing feels quite right. It can be frustrating or disappointing to find that things are more difficult than you imagined. The secret is to be kind to yourself and patient with others, take time to talk to the Lord and seek his guidance about what He has in store for you next. Things do improve with time and you will readjust.

Professional Issues

Restoring your licence to practise

If you relinquished your licence when you left, you can restore it when you return, by presenting three documents: a Certificate of Good Standing (CGS) from the country where you have been working, a reference from your employer and your passport. This is usually straightforward but sometimes there can be difficulties obtaining a CGS. Find out at an early stage what you will need to do to obtain this, and if others have had problems with this before. Inform the GMC straight away if you foresee difficulties. The CGS is only valid for three months after it has been issued, so time your application carefully.

You may be applying for jobs from abroad, at which time you won't have a licence. This should not disadvantage your application – please see the [GMC guidance](#).

There is more information in the *Revalidation Briefing*.

Information for future employers

It can be very difficult to obtain documents after you have left the country, so check with your future employer what will be needed. A police report may be necessary for DBS clearance. You may be required to have a health check and Chest XRay.

Returning to practice

There are no formal re-entry schemes or requirements in most hospital specialties, but it is the responsibility of the doctor to ensure that they are safe to return. Check what is expected in your specialty. The Academy of Medical Royal Colleges produced [guidance](#) in 2012 on returning to practice after being absent for any period over three months. The guidance includes useful suggestions and checklists to help this process. An appraisal will usually be done soon after return and the employer and Responsible Officer will monitor progress.

There is a formal re-entry scheme for GPs. Information about this is available on the [GP National Recruitment Office](#).

Help from friends and colleagues

Returning to work in UK is challenging, even if you are legally able to do so. Make the most of friends and colleagues – doing an informal attachment or sitting in on some clinics can help you to re-acclimatise.

Personal Issues

1. Have you spent adequate time 'saying goodbye' to friends/colleagues in your host country and handing over your work?
2. Do you have the necessary materials to give presentations about your time abroad to church, or work colleagues? Are there photographs you should take, or other information you should gather before you leave?
3. Do you know about '[reverse culture shock](#)'? Do you have any plans to help you deal with it? CMF has a list of resources you may find useful. Be ready for the fact that some friends and colleagues will not be able to relate to your experiences or understand the tensions and pressures caused by returning to UK.
4. Are you planning to take a few weeks off before you start work back in UK? Some holiday after the stress of packing up and arriving home - and time to rest and reflect - is worthwhile.
5. Have you thought about how your children will cope with the transition? It can sometimes be more difficult for them than for you. Our resource list contains some sources of help.
6. Are you aware of the de-briefing arrangements provided by your mission agency or church, if any?

7. Do you think professional de-briefing may assist you in bringing resolution/closure to issues that arose during your time overseas? Do you know who to approach about this? [Interhealth](#) provides this service, or contact [Debbie Hawker](#) for further information about people around the UK who offer debriefing.
8. Is your health satisfactory? Do you need a check up relating to possible tropical disease? [InterHealth](#) in London and [Healthlink 360](#) in Edinburgh will provide this service.
9. Do you have a key group of supporters who can listen to you and provide practical help (eg transport, re-orientation, accommodation) immediately on your return? It is essential that you have emotional/prayer support from key people whom you know well and can trust – if the ones you relied on before going are no longer available, you need to put others in place prior to your return.
10. Do you have specific friends who have worked where you have been - or somewhere similar - with whom you will be able to talk in depth? If not, CMF can connect you with someone to talk through the challenges of re-entry with you.
11. Have you considered having a retreat, where you can make time to listen to God, and rest and receive? [Penhurst Retreat Centre](#) has a programme of 'New Directions' retreats for people who have returned from mission overseas. You can meet others in a similar situation, and enjoy peace, beautiful countryside and good food.
12. Do you plan to have ongoing contact with colleagues where you have been working? Can you continue to support the work in some way?
13. How will your time abroad impact your lives back home? Do you have resolutions you want to keep, regarding lifestyle, or work? It may be worth writing these down in order to review them later. It helps to see your coming back not just as a return to where you were before, but as the beginning of a new opportunity to serve, using the experience and insight you have gained while away.

Remember that many have trodden this path before you and survived.

CMF is here to help.

Please email CMF with any additional material you feel should be included in this document, and give us any other suggestions to improve this document. We plan to update it regularly.



While we seek to be accurate in all the information presented, we do not claim that this document covers all the issues which might affect different individuals. You are advised to discuss your plans with colleagues, supervisors, pastors and others with experience in working overseas.

CMF
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