

crossing cultures

Andrew McArdle shares some 'dos' and 'don'ts'



Andrew McArdle is a paediatric trainee. He recently spent a year working in Freetown, Sierra Leone and was previously part of the NHS Ebola response there

I make no claim to be vastly experienced in working in different cultures, but through my elective, summer trips with CMF and later overseas medical work I have had some opportunities to gain insight. I will start with my own 'don'ts'.

Don't over-prioritise cultural understanding – it is only one of many things that will make you effective in an overseas role. Although crosscultural issues often receive a great deal of attention, in my experience a greater personal challenge overseas is often the interpersonal relations between outsiders, even though all may be working towards the same goal. My experience is mostly in the secular sector, but I hear enough to suspect that this is also true when Christians are working together.

Though there are innumerable ways in which people differ the world over, there are far more similarities. Don't allow yourself to be distracted by the obvious differences and neglect to see the unchanging humanity wherever you go. And don't be a crosscultural perfectionist, feeling that you need to understand every aspect of every culture that exists where you may work. Think about your home life – do you understand everything about the cultures of your own town or country? And yet you get by perfectly well. And while you can have expectations or spot patterns, don't make assumptions about your colleagues or patients. People will defy your expectations!

I worked in a hospital mostly frequented by those of limited means. One of my roles was running the cardiology clinic. I had little expectation that families would make it for follow-up appointments, living spread apart in a city with frequently gridlocked traffic. And yet, week in week out, the majority of my patients would dutifully turn up close to the time of their appointments. I was further surprised when one of my patient's mothers was able to put me in touch with a rich businessman leading a charity trying to send



children overseas for heart surgery.

And so, to my 'dos'. Be yourself and be open. You may work alongside people with extensive history of working with outsiders, and not all their experience may be good. If they can get to know you well, including your own culture, they are more likely to trust you. Aim to do your work well, whatever that is: in general, if people sense that you are interested in them, there to help and have something to offer, you will have a wide degree of cultural latitude. Nonetheless, seek to be aware of cultural norms and where it clearly makes sense, adopt them or adapt to them.

I am often a busy person, frequently in a rush. Though I was aware of the expectation to stop and exchange greetings in Sierra Leone, I struggled hard to move from my British standard of a brief 'hello' without breaking step. In this, I went against a cultural norm. And yet, I never had a sense that this was held against me. Perhaps in a different country, I might not have been treated so kindly, but I believe that because my contribution was valued I was given this latitude. ■