Practice or life in general in the 'West' and a need to re-connect with what medicine is all about, combined with a wish to experience life in a different culture.

The idea of involving NHS professionals in improving the still appalling health of poor nations is strongly supported by a number of health organisations, but it is balanced by the constraints most working GPs face: they cannot usually leave their practice and families for more than 2–3 weeks, and often can’t really commit to an ongoing involvement away from their practice.

But a short-term, one-off visit on its own is unlikely to achieve any real benefit for the host country.

Moreover there is a genuine risk that the visitor may struggle with the unfamiliar lifestyle, health system, and social context. Relatively inexperienced clinicians may face clinical scenarios beyond their skills or make serious mistakes if they lack professional support. ‘Voluntourism’, if badly managed, can create dependency and at worst destabilise the host institution and demoralise rather than motivate local staff. Therefore, any international volunteering programme needs to be carefully and critically thought through and well managed.

In PHASE we have tried to address these issues: we give short-term volunteers an opportunity to experience and enjoy work in Nepal and genuinely help to improve the primary care service in some of the poorest communities in the world. Experienced British GPs visit remote rural health centres for 2–4 weeks, spending time with the local health workers who work in professional isolation. GPs are carefully briefed before their visit and given as much information about what to expect, and what is expected of them, as possible. The focus of the GP placement is not on treating patients but on teaching generic primary care skills. Although often word goes around that a doctor is present in the health post, and some patients come for this reason, it is a priority to reinforce good practice and not to undermine the patients’ confidence in the local health worker. To promote consistency and continuity, volunteers follow PHASE clinical guidelines and teaching guidance.

PHASE clinical guidelines and teaching guidance.

The health workers are mostly young women with less than 2 years formal training, but they are highly motivated and enthusiastic. The challenge of sharing their struggle to provide good primary care in very basic conditions, in the stunningly beautiful setting of rural Nepal, is hard to beat for re-kindling professional enthusiasm. As one volunteer puts it:

‘I had a great time working alongside Pushpa, Kalpana, and Nisha but feel I only scratched the surface of what could be achieved. […] When can I go back?!’

Our experience suggests that well organised ‘medical voluntourism’ can be highly satisfactory for both sides of the partnership.

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DOI: 10.3399/bjgp12X658892

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