

The Need to Increase International Reproductive Health Medical Education

In developing this resource, the authors researched the extent to which international reproductive health (IRH) issues are addressed in U.S. medical school curricula. Findings indicate that most U.S. medical schools do not offer formal international education or training opportunities, and there is no research to suggest any emphasis on reproductive health.ⁱ Most students seeking international education and training must research, design, and fund their own travel or course of study. Yet in spite of this, student interest in international health continues to grow. Of students graduating from U.S. medical schools in 2003, more than 20% participated in an international health experience during their preservice medical training, compared with 6% of those graduating in 1984.ⁱⁱ

Most U.S. medical schools do not adequately equip medical students with the information they need to understand critical international reproductive health issues. As a result, U.S. medical students may not be aware of reproductive health conditions in the developing world. For example:

- Inadequate reproductive health care accounts for almost 20% of all illness and premature death worldwide and 33% of death and illness among women of childbearing age.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Women in developing countries are 40 times more likely to die from pregnancy related causes than those in developed countries. In West Africa, one in every 12 women will die from pregnancy related causes, compared with one in every 4,000 in the developed world.^{iv}
- At the end of 2004, 39.4 million people were living with HIV/AIDS. Of them, women accounted for just under 50% of all cases. The developing world is, by far, disproportionately affected, with 64% of all people living with HIV and 76% of all women living with HIV living in Sub-Saharan Africa alone.^v
- Each day 14,000 people become infected with HIV. Half of them are between 15 and 24 years of age.^{vi}

In addition to providing students with valuable training that may be lacking at their own medical schools, an international medical education experience in reproductive health also offers students with experience in delivering medical care to culturally diverse and/or underserved populations.^{vii,viii} The benefits of medical students participating in an international elective range from improved examination skills and a decreased reliance on technology, to an overall greater understanding of international health issues.^{ix} Additionally, physicians in training who participated in international health experiences "recognized that skills in cultural competence, community health, outreach, patient education, prevention, interdisciplinary teamwork, and communication are necessary for the practice of medicine in the United States as well as abroad."^x A similar study of nursing students who participated in international education programs showed that the benefits of international education included an enhanced global perspective and increased personal and intellectual development that were long-lasting.^{xi}

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