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Flying the flag for overseas placements

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Introduction

For the benefit of students world-wide I wish to fly the flag for overseas placement opportunities using personal experience of a split final year placement between the UK and South Africa. This placement afforded a wealth of opportunities to understand diversity between cultures and therapeutic approaches within local and global contexts.

Objectives

To identify personal and professional development opportunities to be gained from overseas practice placements

To discuss the challenges faced when transferring skills learnt in a developed country, to that of a third world environment with diverse cultures

Description

Working in a dementia unit within an elderly care facility in Bloemfontein, South Africa for the second five weeks of a split placement was challenging and life changing. Language barriers, cultural differences and frequent ethical dilemmas presented their own challenges. Adaptation of previously learnt skills and approaches within a service of limited resources encouraged creativity and sound clinical reasoning.

Areas reflected on:

- Relying heavily on non-verbal communication - the majority of conversations were conveyed through culturally appropriate signs, gestures and facial expressions
- Working with translators to facilitate group and one-to-one sessions whilst striving to build rapport
- Justifying sound clinical reasoning for inventive and resourceful therapies without having daily supervision
- Working alongside South African OT students whose course and approach differs greatly
- Educating others about UK practice
- Importance of sustainability in practice as many of the services are provided solely by OT students and are not maintained when students are not on placement
- Differences of needs of a Third World country and the impact of culture and diversity

Contribution to Occupational Therapy / Conclusion

Overseas placements have the potential to greatly enhance learning, develop knowledge and enable students to develop awareness of occupational therapy needs and resource utilisation in culturally diverse environments. Considering existing difficulties in finding practice placements for students within the UK (Craik and Turner 2005), overseas placements may provide opportunities to enrich a student's study while providing Universities with a valuable resource for further placement options.

Craik C & Turner A (2005) A chronic shortage of Practice Placements: Whose Responsibility? British Journal of Occupational Therapy 68 (5)

