

Exploitation or Instruction? The Ethical Mires of International Voluntourism and Volunteering

Veterinary medicine lends itself to international volunteering and voluntourism because it represents a certain level of wealth, but facilitates the basic needs of all people by enhancing agriculture and public health. Well-intentioned people from the developed world wish to improve the lives of their fellow humans in the underdeveloped world, and often find physically engaging work to be the most rewarding means of achieving this. Benevolence, however, combined with the complex and nuanced issues of foreign aid can result in unintended consequences mired in ethical issues. International voluntourism and volunteering require the utmost care in order to avoid exploitation of developing nations and are not the most efficient use of resources.

Volunteer tourism, or voluntourism, is a recently popular phenomenon wherein tourists embark on trips that specifically encompass a volunteer component. These trips usually travel to developing countries to perform work that involves some form of hands-on labor. The voluntourist absorbs the costs for travel and lodging expenses, and in most situations the trip is organized by a company or non-profit organization. Voluntourism differs from other international volunteering in that it often has a focus on participant enjoyment, requires few skills, is available to anyone who can afford the high fees, gives authority to inexperienced participants with minimal training, and takes place over a short period of time. There exists a wide spectrum of voluntourism, ranging from well-intentioned and appropriately planned trips that, by all measurable standards, perform good work, to corporatized vacations that exploit local communities and serve basically no useful function.

In the veterinary profession, voluntourism manifests mainly as programs situated in developing countries that market themselves as conservation, wildlife rehabilitation, or spay/neuter population control trips for pre-vet students, vet students, and sometimes the public. The issues these trips aim to address are complex, interdisciplinary, and unsolved even in developed parts of the world. In many cases, the countries in question do not have the veterinarians or resources to devote to the issues in question ("Shortage in number of veterinarians is a major constraint to world food security and safety."). Therefore, veterinary medicine exported from the developed world has the potential to fill this need. However, the execution of this plan must be nuanced and culturally sensitive given the long-standing precedent for developed countries to enter developing countries in the name of administering aid, but in reality extract resources and leave behind a desolate and dependent population.

Some aspects of voluntourism trips are unequivocally positive. Most notably, participants experience a new culture to a much greater extent than the average tourist would. Regardless of the nature of the work, deeper involvement in a community brings the volunteer in closer proximity to the culture, the people, and their day-to-day experience and struggles. An eye-opening lesson about the wealth of the Western World typically also accompanies these experiences. Travel and exposure to international variations is beneficial in many ways, and can have positive effects in both the professional and personal spheres. For instance, certain diseases occur more commonly in underdeveloped parts of the world, and local veterinarians sometimes have troubleshooted a means of coping with them. Learning these methods enriches the volunteers' conventional education and has the potential to enhance their abilities as a clinician.

As alluded to, these trips result in technical training or solidification of skills. Irrespective of the argument that on-the-job training is inappropriate when the life or health of an animal hangs in the balance, participants do often learn new techniques and have the opportunity to exercise their skillset. Because of the potentially high volume of animals and extremity of the community need, students might become quite proficient in their skills. Students do not need to receive this type of training and practice in international settings because opportunities exist for this in their home countries. However, many benefit immensely from exposure to a novel culture and way of life.

Assuming a trip proceeds without any major setbacks, the hosting community will most likely reap some sort of benefit. At the very least, they will gain a cultural experience by interacting with people from a different country and culture. At the very most, volunteers complete some amount of work that the local people could not have done on their own. The productivity of the participants and tangible goals they achieve vary widely depending on the type of trip. At the end of a population control trip, for instance, a concrete number of animals will be spayed or neutered. Conservation or wildlife rehabilitation trips, on that other hand, usually charge high fees that often contribute to conservation or wildlife rehabilitation efforts enacted by the non-volunteer arm of the organization.

The main ethical issues surrounding voluntourism revolve not around what the programs aim to accomplish, but rather how they operate. The extent to which participants perform procedures beyond their training level is a critical ethical factor. While some voluntourism programs only offer spots to veterinary students of a specific year, many require no prior training in order to participate. Even those organizations that only accept students

often encourage participants to perform procedures above their technical level, such as surgery. This is especially concerning if the student is not yet in veterinary school. Even if the student receives adequate training and guidance in the field during surgery, this would be unacceptable in most circumstances in a developed country ("Surgical Procedures by Nonveterinary Students.").

The "Surgical Procedures by Nonveterinary Students" policy of the American Veterinary Medical Association states that:

"surgery performed for non-research purposes on any animal is the practice of veterinary medicine that requires extensive knowledge of anatomy, physiology, pathology, and medicine. Therefore, instruction of NONVETERINARY students in surgical procedures is not advocated."

The statement continues to address the circumstances under which veterinary students can perform surgery: "within the context of a structured course of study administered by a post-secondary institution, under direct veterinary supervision (i.e. with the veterinarian physically present) and with prior approval of the appropriate IACUC." An AVMA policy statement from 2010 cautions students to only participate in programs that meet the standards of the Veterinary Medical Care Guidelines for Spay-Neuter Programs and "only to the extent that is appropriate for their level of education." ("Vida Veterinary Program.") Clarifying the latter point, the statement continues: "only students who have participated in the surgery laboratory curriculum should actively perform surgery...Pre-veterinary students and veterinary technicians should not perform surgeries." Based on the promotional material from program websites as well as anecdotal evidence from participants, not all voluntourism programs of this nature follow these clear guidelines. Furthermore, laws regulating these actions might not exist, or may not be enforced, in the host countries. Taking advantage of the lax or nonexistent

regulations regarding veterinary medicine in developing countries in order to learn a skill that is already part of veterinary school curriculums is exploitative and unnecessary.

Veterinary students must receive training and practice procedures on live animals at some point, and often in the United States this occurs in the accepted context of animal shelters. Practicing on shelter animals in the United States, however, is different than practicing on animals in another country by the very nature of its proximity. Many communities in the States face the problem of animal overpopulation, and practicing a spay or neuter surgery on local homeless animals, for example, actively addresses this issue in a manner deemed appropriate by local experts. It is also convenient and cost efficient to practice on the animals in local communities, not to mention the fact that shelters notoriously lack sufficient resources and benefit from any aid. And even well-funded spay/neuter programs operate in the face of the fact that an exceptionally high portion of the population must be sterilized to achieve any level of population control. Traveling internationally and using partially-skilled student labor is hardly the most effective use of resources to address this particular issue.

Discerning whether a voluntourism organization has taken all necessary measures to ensure responsible conduct is difficult. Their mission statement provides a clue, but organizations can and do obscure their true actions- especially when the participants tend to be idealistic and the host countries realistically incapable of advocating for themselves. Wildlife rehabilitation and conservation trips open to the public are especially susceptible to this because the product they market is so attractive. Nearly everyone wants to work with charismatic megafauna in an exotic climate. Many websites do not elaborate on how they work with local communities, while some do not even mention it. Furthermore, some organizations

are not forthright with their participants. One survey of voluntourism participants found that volunteers did not perform most or any of the work promised on the organization's website (Gillier, C., and M. L. Zivanovic., 2014).

And finally, there is the ethical dilemma of voluntourism itself. In voluntourism, volunteers with good intentions and enough money to fund the endeavor benefit from the poverty of others, who may or may not actually gain anything in return. The trip centers around the experience of the voluntourist, and affecting productive change in the local community is simply a fringe benefit, a byproduct. The nature of capitalism dictates that companies will take advantage of this idealistic and naïve market to profit from it. Most voluntourist programs are run by tourism companies, who generally put the welfare of the company and the volunteer above that of the volunteered. There is little incentive to do otherwise. These ethical lines become even more blurred in the context of a trip designed for veterinary students, when an added benefit is the professional development of a doctor.

Not all international volunteering opportunities manifest as questionably exploitative semi-neocolonialism, however. When locals invite a volunteer group into their community to work together as partners, and when the participants perform procedures appropriate to their technical skill level, the trip no longer qualifies as exploitative. Furthermore, the chances of entering an ethically fraught zone decrease significantly when the volunteers know exactly where their money is going. In other words, participants can never know for sure the ultimate destination of a lump sum paid to an organizing company. For this reason, trips organized through universities or local institutions, when volunteers often make their own arrangements, have the potential to be more ethically responsible. Smaller scale, skill-focused trips with local

collaboration move out of the realm of voluntourism, and into the less ethically charged category of international volunteering.

Ethical concerns surrounding voluntourism and international volunteering will persist for the foreseeable future due to the extreme inequalities between the volunteers and the volunteered. However, organizations that collaborate extensively with locals, learn from locals, recognize their limitations, admit strictly qualified volunteers, and allow volunteers to only perform tasks appropriate to their skill level may mitigate some of the potentially adverse effects and even create a net benefit. Voluntourism and international volunteering are not the most efficient use of resources, however the experience the student receives can be exceptionally valuable. Additionally, solving the problems these programs attempt to address requires a foreign aid paradigm shift well above the capacity of any private or non-governmental organization. Therefore, voluntourism and international volunteering undertaken with the appropriate degree of nuance, humility, and cultural sensitivity may be the best option available.

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