

UCL SOP VOLUNTEERING

Give back, better yourself and overcome your fears



Fifth Edition, Nov 2018

Special Edition Volunteer Profile: Rebecca Bloor



1. Hi Rebecca, tell me a bit about yourself?

Hi! I obtained my pharmacy degree at the University of Otago in New Zealand after which I worked in a community Pharmacy for a while. I have been working at the RPS for over a year now. I mostly oversee the different teams within the Pharmaceutical Press division and I am currently working on the purchase of a new product.

2. Where have you volunteered before?

I volunteered with Médecins Sans Frontières, also known as 'Doctors without borders', for 6 months in Malawi.

3. What is Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)?

MSF is an international medical humanitarian non-governmental organisation (NGO) whose charter is to help provide emergency relief for those most in need. This includes victims of natural or man-made disasters, famine, and armed conflict.

4. Tell me about your project

I was involved in the management of HIV medication in a rural area of Malawi, where 58% of the population were known to be HIV positive. There were 12 health centres with no consistency in the supply of medicines and often the dispensaries were essentially empty. I was not exclusively working with HIV medication and at times we also worked with other NGOs to help prevent malarial infection.

To ensure that the medicines were being distributed proportionately to the level of demand, we would never give more than 2 weeks supply at a time. MSF has been managing the distribution of HIV medication in Malawi with hopes to hand over this control to the government within a 4-year period. Following the completion of this project, MSF endeavours to pick up work with screening and treatment of cervical cancer.

5. What were the requirements?

You must be a pharmacist with at least 5 years of clinical practice. An additional requirement is that you demonstrate both previous experience and a true desire for volunteering. It is also of high importance that you have congruent humanitarian views relative to the recruiters and that you are able to express these during interview.

6. How did you find out about it? What made you decide to start volunteering?

MSF is very reputable, so I have always known about it. However, the decision to apply was triggered when one of my friends who was a nurse was selected.

7. Looking back, what was the best thing about the experience and what was the most challenging?

I know it sounds cliché but the best thing would have to be the fact that I was able to make a difference. This experience also really helped me establish my personal boundaries and allowed me to see how much I could stretch myself, both emotionally and in terms of my work capabilities.

During my time in Malawi, I was fraught with a lot of challenges such as being away from most things familiar and having very little contact with friends and family. Sadly, chocolate was also hard to come by.

The most challenging thing however was knowing that we could only provide short-term aid. This is because the role of MSF as an organisation, is to specifically help those MOST in need during emergency situations, and it is therefore not their priority to create sustainable long-term solutions such as hand over of medicine distribution to locals.

8. Do you feel that you personally have made a difference, and if so what?

I definitely feel as though I made a difference. I fought very hard for the pharmacy store keeper in terms of allowing him to have more responsibility and therefore help the progression of his career. Even simple things, such as providing stationery for the staff to use when dispensing, greatly impacted the outcomes of our objectives. In order to minimise compliance issues centered around illiteracy, we also took the initiative to draw symbols such as the sun and moon to indicate when certain medicines should be taken.

If you've been inspired by Rebecca's experience, you can find out more about volunteering with Médecins Sans Frontières here: <https://www.msf.org.uk>; or <http://studentsunionucl.org/clubs-societies/friends-of-medecins-sans-frontieres-society>