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Jefferson Students Study Abroad with Funds from the Foerderer Grant for International Study

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Jefferson Students Study Abroad with Funds from the Foerderer Grant for International Study

While the health care and medical education systems in the United States are the most advanced clinically and technologically, other countries throughout the world have valuable lessons to teach our future healthcare providers. Participating in rotations abroad offers a unique opportunity to observe treatment practices, and to learn more about how varying national health care systems function. The Office of International Exchange Services at Jefferson Medical College (JMC) has the knowledge and experience to guide students who wish to take this unique step to broaden their knowledge and experience in medicine.^{1,2,3}

In the mid-1990's, the JMC student group, International Medicine Society, conducted a survey to determine interest in rotations abroad. More than 20% of the students indicated that an international experience would enhance their education, increase their level of confidence and influence their future practice of medicine. At the time, a few students were studying abroad using their own money or funds occasionally made available by the JMC Dean's office. At the request of Mr. James Stratton, then Chairman of the Global Advisory Board, and with the help of Jussi J. Saukkonen, MD, former Vice President for International Affairs, the Foerderer Board was approached and agreed to earmark \$25,000 of the Foerderer Foundation money for students to use for this purpose. Guidelines were written, liability waivers were constructed, and processes for the selection of grantees and grantees' reporting requirements (both written and oral) were devised. Within a few years, the Foerderer Board agreed to raise the amount of money available to \$40,000 per year, and to designate this as one of their four priority funding initiatives.

The Foerderer grant program offers several exchange opportunities for students in all fields of health care. Students in the Jefferson College of Health Professions (JCHP) have a chance to take advantage of long-standing exchange partnerships such as Hogeschool van Arnhem en Nijmegen, Netherlands for Physical Therapy research and Kitasato University in Japan for Cytotechnology studies. More recently, the Department of Occupational Therapy developed relationships in Cuba, where students and faculty have gone for short teaching and learning experiences.

Additional exchange programs exist for JMC students. A program in Kampala, Uganda, developed by Dr. James Plumb, Clinical Associate Professor of Family Medicine, has already hosted twenty-five students who returned with fascinating stories of medical practice they observed and the people they met. Erin Chuck, JMC '03, in describing her motivation for choosing Uganda as her site said: "It is [my] plan to become an internal medicine doctor and I have a strong interest in infectious diseases. The AIDS epidemic in Africa will allow me to witness the clinical presentation of HIV and other infectious diseases that I would not see in the United States." Upon her return she wrote, "In Uganda we saw stark poverty and in the midst of it, such generosity. My month working and living at Hospice Uganda is a superficial look at Africa at best. Each time I was asked, 'How was Africa?' I tried to refine my answer to make it more true. In the end, the only answer that I gave which rang true each and every time was, 'If you get a chance to go to Uganda, you should go.'"

Another Jefferson-organized course is the Jefferson Medical Language Immersion Program in the Dominican Republic. Medical Spanish classes held throughout the

year at Jefferson are supplemented with community health activities and the 6-week program in Santo Domingo. Host families provide housing, and medical Spanish classes in the morning prepare participants for clinical visits each afternoon. Applications have more than doubled since the program's inception in Summer 2004.

Many students design their own exchange experiences. Hospitals and medical schools throughout the world have special programs for visiting medical students, and Jefferson students have taken advantage of programs in Nepal, India, Scotland, Ireland, Spain and Australia. Some students with relatives in other countries, including China, Korea, and Vietnam, arrange for hospital observation under the tutelage of a local physician. Organizations such as Child Family Health International, SALUD and Project HOPE also offer worthwhile programs for students.⁴ "The internship with Project HOPE in Uzbekistan opened my eyes to strengths and weaknesses in the American health systems that I might never have otherwise seen. It gave me a realization of how privileged we are and a humbling appreciation of the obstacles medical practitioners face in economically stressed areas of the globe," Alan Riley, JMC '06 wrote of his trip.

Thomas Jefferson University has been the home for the headquarters of the international Federation of Medical Students' Associations United States affiliate (IFMSA-USA) since 2000. One of the highest priorities of the international operation of IFMSA is to promote student exchange around the world and provide educational experiences for students at its conventions. IFMSA provides an inexpensive way for students observe at a hospital in another part of the world, arranging a reciprocal exchange for students who then come to the United States for a month. JMC students have received Foerderer Grants for International Study for these IFMSA exchanges, visiting Australia, Egypt, Spain and elsewhere.

Since 1997, 169 Jefferson students have been funded with Foerderer grants for study abroad, including students from JMC and JCHP. Applications for Foerderer grants are up 67 percent from last year. Student requests for grants for Summer 2005 are four times higher than available funds. This reflects the success of the exchanges and the students' growing interest in enjoying one of these unique and valuable experiences.

In hopes of meeting this demand for support, fundraising remains a primary activity of the Office of International Affairs. A recent success comes from a newly forged partnership between Noguchi Medical Research Institute and JMC. Led by Yoshihisa Asano, the Institute has revitalized its exchange program and is offering rotation opportunities in Tokyo to resident physicians and 3rd- and 4th-year medical students. This is just one of many adjunct programs in development for which the Foerderer grants have set a precedent.

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About the Author

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