THE VALUE OF FIELD TRAINING WITH CUAMM

We conducted a retrospective study in partnership with the University of Padua to assess the outcome for medical students and residents of CUAMM’s training opportunities in Africa. The findings? Plenty of satisfaction and growth, both professional and personal, including greater empathy and understanding of social inequalities.

TEXT BY / CHIARA DI BENEDETTO / DOCTORS WITH AFRICA CUAMM

It was 2005 when, together with CUAMM, the Italian Medical Students’ Association (SISM) laid the groundwork for the Wolisso Project: an opportunity to undertake a month-long internship in Africa to experience up close how international health cooperation works. The Junior Project Officer (JPO) program, a period of training for medical students officially recognized by universities as an integral part of their residencies, had already been launched in 2002. Together, these two field opportunities have helped prepare students to become the doctors of the future, taking part in CUAMM’s daily work alongside its African partners while also undergoing crucial outside-the-classroom training thanks to synergic partnerships with universities.

CUAMM has always been proud of these programs, fine-tuning them over time as the number of participants began to rise: by 2006 three students were leaving for Wolisso yearly, while by 2018 the figure had grown tenfold, with destinations including both Wolisso and Tosamanganga. Given the programs’ growing appeal to medical students and residents, we decided to carry out a retrospective analysis to assess the impact of both on those who have taken part in them. Indeed, interning in an African country can change an individual’s approach to the medical profession not just in the short term, but also the medium-to-long term. We wanted to know what past participants might have in common today.

In partnership with the University of Padua’s Statistics Division we formulated two questionnaires – one for Wolisso Project participants and the other for JPOs – and asked everyone who had taken part in them. We conducted a retrospective study in partnership with the University of Padua to assess the outcome for medical students and residents of CUAMM’s training opportunities in Africa. The findings? Plenty of satisfaction and growth, both professional and personal, including greater empathy and understanding of social inequalities.

As might be expected, following their time in Africa respondents also became more attentive to the matter of health inequalities, with both medical students and residents measuring their concern at 8 or above on a 1 to 10 scale. Neither the respondents’ destinations nor the years in which they went seemed to bear any influence on these perceptions.

These first-hand responses show the long-lasting positive impact that training for just a few months in an African setting can have, offering a window onto the extraordinary qualities we have all witnessed – and so appreciated – in doctors working in Covid-19 wards during the current public health crisis, and underscoring the synergic blend of professional know-how, social vision and empathy that is required to serve in that capacity in an optimal manner.

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