



REVIEW

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 Tosamaganga. 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 ever participated in either program to fill one out. Of the 257 possible respondents in the former case, 55%, or 141 students from 30 Italian universities, did so, while of the 183 possible JPO respondents, 79%, or 144 students from 32 universities from every Italian region, did. The current age of respondents ranged from 29 to 50.

Here's what we found: despite differences in age and type of training, as well as in the durations of the internships and training periods (1 month for students or young graduates with the Wolisso Project, and from 6 to 12 months as JPO residents), many reported similar sentiments about their experiences. There was a widespread sense of satisfaction: 95% of Wolisso Project participants and 94% of JPOs said they would gladly go back for a re-do. Participants of both programs confirmed the importance of their experiences in both professional and personal terms, with 90% reporting having gained in terms not only of their humanity – learning to view patients first and foremost as human beings and only second in terms of their health

issues – but also their resilience. A large number of respondents felt they'd become more courageous and empathetic; many also reported having learned to cooperate better, and to feel greater respect for others and more patience with, and trust in, themselves.

TABLE / DID YOUR EXPERIENCE AS A JPO CHANGE HOW YOU WORK AS A HEALTH PROFESSIONAL?

	Decreased	Unchanged	Increased	No.
Ability to organize and carry out work independently	0%	22%	78%	144
Confidence/trust in oneself	2%	19%	78%	144
Empathy (ability to understand patients)	0%	34%	66%	144
Patience	5%	38%	57%	144
Courage (ability to make decisions and take responsibility for their outcome)	0%	25%	75%	144
Resilience (finding positive aspects even in the worst circumstances)	0%	24%	76%	144
Respect for others	0%	51%	49%	144
Team cooperation (ability to work with others)	0%	47%	53%	144

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.

FIGURE / DEGREE OF INTEREST IN THE ISSUE OF HEALTH INEQUITY

