

Global Health Conference 2009

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Jasveen is a 4th year medical student in Wellington. She has attended several international conferences including two Global Health Conferences in Australia, and one IFMSA General Assembly in Mexico. Her passion for global health has inspired her involvement in NZMSA as sponsorship officer this year to explore ways in which global health groups can raise their profile amongst medical students in NZ.



From 2nd to 5th July 2009, I attended the Global Health Conference (GHC) in Brisbane, Australia. The GHC was run by the Australian Medical Students Association (AMSA) and held at the beautiful St Lucia Campus of the University of Queensland. I was only able to be there by the partial funding I received from the New Zealand Medical Association Leadership Fund. I would like to thank the NZMA for creating this opportunity for me.

What I found the most eye-opening at GHC were the talks on the realities of humanitarian field work. Problems of delivering aid were addressed. These included government resistance and corruption, lack of transport and infrastructure, communication difficulties, and the concept of teaching rather than bringing aid. Speakers provided possible solutions to these logistical and political problems which was great food for thought. They showed me how healthcare is one of the biggest political drivers in every country, and as doctors we cannot ignore social and political structure wherever we may go.

Other speakers addressed practical tips to aid work. In particular, Dr Nick Coatsworth, the Vice-President of Medecins Sans Frontiers (MSF) in Australia, spoke of the reality of being on the frontline in crisis areas. There were hard decisions to make about who to treat, when to leave, and what would happen when they left. In conjunction with this, 'Triage' an emotionally charged documentary about the former International MSF President Dr James Orbinski was screened. It showed how ugly humanitarian work can be because of those hard decisions. I think aid work has been romanticised by a lot of enthusiastic young people, and it is necessary to see something like this to realise exactly how difficult a job it is. At the same time the documentary also showed the positive impact Dr Orbinski had on people he left behind in the Somali famine and genocide in Rwanda. 'Triage' is definitely something I would encourage every medical student to watch before they graduate.

The 'Challenge Day' consisted of a set of stations we rotated through in small groups. Each station illustrated a different aspect of global health addressed throughout the conference. Stations included carrying water in a standard issue 'developing country' bucket (a hole ridden bucket) from the beautiful University Queensland lake over 500 metres to illustrate what people in developing countries have to do everyday. Other stations addressed language barriers, resource allocation, emergency management, tropical diseases, and more. A lot of the 'Challenge Day' was useful medically and could be something we could include in our student conferences here in New Zealand.

Overall I would recommend AMSA's GHC for every medical student interested in finding out how New Zealand doctors fit in with the rest of the world. The GHC is suited for all medical students at all stages of training because much of it is focused on thinking about the medical profession as a whole and how it fits into life.

Please don't hesitate to contact me or anyone else who has attended these conferences for more information.
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