



# Living In Emergency: Stories of Doctors Without Borders, directed by Mark N. Hopkins

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> Sylvia Duncan is a Trainee Intern at the University of Otago. She has a passion for emergency medicine and spends far too much time “studying” on Netflix watching documentaries.

Wasting no time, the film opens with grainy news footage depicting violence without reprieve in war-torn Congo. A doctor in scrubs laments the limited resources available to them. ‘The need is pretty much infinite’, he says, holding his head in his hands. Images of neonates with eyes swollen shut and adults carried over rubble on makeshift stretchers flood the screen as if to prove his point.

You would be forgiven for feeling a little shell-shocked at the opening of *Living in Emergency: Stories of Doctors Without Borders*.<sup>1</sup> The Oscar-nominated documentary, released in 2008, pulls no punches and exposes its audience to the truly horrifying environment that the medical volunteers of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) find themselves in. It is not the illnesses themselves that this film provides insight into however; rather, it follows several new recruits and seasoned veterans as they navigate daily life and medical practice in restricting and often dangerous conditions. Their stories, often tales of suffering patients and little sleep, are haunting.

One of the clinicians we follow is an Australian doctor as he becomes the first medical professional a village in Liberia has seen for 15 years. At first he loves it; the independence and rewarding nature of his work keeping him motivated to work non-stop. Quickly the isolation and stress of the job fall heavy upon him, leaving both him and the viewer feeling utterly helpless. We watch him quarrel with local medical personnel, who make it clear they do not like the way they are being treated by a foreigner. We watch as he argues with staff on a brief visit to the capital because they implore him not to treat patients without gloves, a decision that leaves him limited by the availability of this rare and expensive commodity. He explains to the camera over lunch that people are dying as he is eating, but he can not do anything about it – he has to eat. This unsettling course of events takes only a few minutes to unfold for the viewer; immersing us in the same disorientating environment as the new recruits.

The naivety and rapid decline in morale of young clinicians is contrasted skilfully with the expertise and attitude of senior volunteers, all of whom are very familiar with MSF. One recurring face is that of Klara, an MSF doctor who has been with the organisation for nearly ten years. In one scene she sits in a wicker chair by an open window in downtown

Monrovia, smoke trailing from her cigarette as she speaks nonchalantly about the things she has seen in her time there. She frequently compares workloads there and in France, her home nation. ‘Here’, she says, ‘I have thirty patients. They’re all mine. They’re all life threatening’. She shrugs. You can not help but feel that she has been hardened by her years of service, an uncomfortable feeling that makes you wonder what sort of hell she has been through.

This documentary is compulsory viewing for medical students with an adventurous streak that have ever considered volunteering overseas once qualified. Although this documentary may not be representative of all volunteer placements, students should be prepared for the realities they could be facing one day.

*Living in Emergency* can also provide some insight into working in clinical practice, and for that reason I implore students to watch this film during their clinical years. While the nature of the diseases and overwhelming poverty present in these countries are far from what we face here in New Zealand, some of the core workforce issues of the medical profession that the MSF team experience invite comparison to our own. A blasé and sometimes crude attitude from seasoned health professionals, overwhelming burnout in new recruits, and the seemingly infinite and thankless task of treating patients make this documentary highly relatable for students placed in the clinical environment.

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### References

1. *Living in Emergency: Stories of Doctors Without Borders* [film]. USA: Red Floor Pictures; 2008.

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