

# Electives Guide

## Selecting a destination

The first decision that you need to make is developed vs. developing world. Once this is decided, think about which region you would like to go to. If everywhere in the region is new to you, then be willing to apply to multiple countries in the area to increase your chance of success.

Some factors that may influence your decision:

- Safety – check out the current travel advice at the [Smart Traveller website](#) (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade)
- Cost
- Language – while this is unlikely to be a deciding factor, be aware that a language barrier can have an enormous impact on your ability to interact with doctors and patients. Many hospitals in the developing world practice much of their medicine in English, but confirm this before you undertake your placement. And consider learning some of the local language before you leave Australia.

For information on places to undertake an elective, check out:

- Insight Electives night – usually held near the start of the year, it's an opportunity to hear fellow students talk about their elective experiences
- Elective Databases:
  - Insight Elective [Database](#)
  - University of Queensland Elective [Database](#)
  - [TEN](#): The Electives Network (you need to be an MDA member to access this – membership is free for students)
- Books:
  - 'Beyond Borders' by Hamish Graham
  - 'The Medic's Guide to Work and Electives Around the World' by Mark Wilson
- Companies that can organise electives for you:
  - Work the World
  - Adventure Alternative

## Application process

1. Start this as soon as you can. Elective placements at hospitals in the First World often fill up 1-2 years in advance. While you don't need to be quite this organised with the developing world, it is worthwhile sending out applications 10-12 months prior to your intended placement.
2. Compose an application letter – it only needs to be brief.

3. Send the letter via email and consider also sending it via post to enhance your chances of getting a response.
  - Finding contact details for hospitals is possibly the most challenging part of organising an elective overseas, particularly in the developing world. As well as using the above Elective Databases, quiz fellow students who have previously done electives overseas for their supervisors' contact details and also trawl the internet – eventually you will find what you're looking for!
  - It is worthwhile sending applications to MANY different hospitals – it is not uncommon for students to apply to 20+ hospitals and still have to keep trying.
4. If you don't hear back in 2-3 weeks, send a follow-up email politely checking that they received your initial email.
5. If you still don't hear back from them, don't be disheartened! Call the hospital to check that you have the right email address, and re-send it. Telephone contact is also useful as it demonstrates to the hospital that you are indeed keen to go there.
6. Once the ball has got rolling, make you sure CONFIRM your placement, in writing. Do this again about 4 weeks before you commence your elective, especially to confirm details around arrival at the hospital from the airport, accommodation etc.

### **Insurance**

- Travel insurance – obviously this is essential. You can buy comprehensive insurance online or organise it via your travel agent. It's worth shopping around as prices vary considerably. If you're planning on also going away for your SCAP later in the year, it may be worth buying a 12 month insurance package – but read the details carefully as these contracts generally only cover you for individual trips less than 60 days.
- Medical insurance – most of the Medical Defence Organisations provide free medical indemnity cover to med students whilst on their elective. You will need to visit the relevant website and fill out an online form.

### **Finances**

- Loans – it is common practice for 5<sup>th</sup> year students to take out a loan for their elective. Before locking yourself into one, make sure you check out all the options. Remember to look over the fine details such as; interest rates, how many withdrawals you can make over the course of the loan and does the loan come with its own credit card.
- Grants:
  - MIGA Student Elective Grant
  - AMA(SA) Elective Grant

## Aid

Many students want to take donations of medical equipment with them when they go on placement to a developing country. In order to go about this;

- Send an email to your destination hospital asking for a 'wish list' – there's no point taking items that are not required, when other, often simple, items are in high demand. If your hospital fails to reply with a 'wish list', ask students who have visited the hospital before what they noticed was lacking.
- Apply to [Insight](#) for an Aid Consignment or a Development Fund Grant for more information.
- Suss out whether the hospital that you are placed at in Adelaide has a store of items for donation.
- Investigate the option of purchasing necessary items yourself, which is made even easier if you are successful in applying for an Aid Grant.
- Take with you a letter on an official letterhead, such as from Insight, outlining that the medical goods are a *donation* for the hospital, as you may need to provide some documentation at customs.

## Vaccinations & Medications

- Vaccinations – it is highly likely that you will need a variety of vaccinations if you are travelling to a developing country. Remember to begin your vaccination schedule more than 3 months before you depart as some of the vaccines require multiple doses a few weeks apart. It is recommended that you visit a travel doctor for the best advice.
- HIV PEP – think carefully about undertaking a surgical elective in a country with a high HIV prevalence. It may be necessary for you to take a short course of HIV Post-Exposure Prophylaxis with you. This 5 day course is taken upon advice (from the prescribing doctor in Australia) after a needle stick injury or other exposure to blood/blood products in the scenario in which the patient is known HIV-positive or status unknown in a country with a high prevalence. Upon commencing HIV PEP, the student should immediately travel to a major city to obtain the full course of HIV PEP. To obtain HIV PEP, you can either make an outpatients' appointment with the Infectious Disease Unit at the RAH (book this EARLY as it can be hard to make an appointment) or alternatively, some travel doctors will also dispense PEP.
- Personal protection – many hospitals in developing countries do not have adequate protective gear for their own staff, let alone medical students. It is generally useful to take your own scrubs and face masks (if doing a surgical elective), disposable gloves (a few boxes), anti-bacterial hand-wash and goggles.
- Other medications – take a travel medical kit with you. Your travel doctor will be able to recommend which antibiotics & other essential medications you will need.

## Flights

- Book these early to avoid having to compromise on dates as the planes fill up, and also for cheaper fares.
- If you are planning on travelling after your elective, depending on your destinations it may be cheaper to book an 'around the world' ticket.
- Flights into and out of Africa are expensive, and some countries more than others – if budget is an issue, it is worthwhile checking this out before you confirm your placement (for example, it is much cheaper to get to southern and eastern Africa than western Africa.)

### **Excess Baggage**

- If you are taking an Aid Consignment with you overseas, you are able to apply for excess baggage with most airlines. Organise this early! Email the airline that you are flying with, along with an official letter, either from your elective hospital confirming your placement, or from Insight outlining your aid package.

### **Visas**

- Find out what kind of visa you will need – in some countries it is appropriate to have simply a tourist visa but others will require a student visa. There is often a significant cost difference between the two.
- If arranging your visas from home, make sure that you send off your passport to the consulate plenty of time in advance to your departure date. Otherwise, get your visa at the border when you arrive at your destination. It is often cheaper to purchase your visa at the border, and may in fact be less hassle than sending your passport away for it in Australia (but always confirm that this is an option *before* you leave!).

### **And just before you leave...**

- Leave a photocopy of all your important documents at home, and put another copy in your suitcase.
- Leave contact details for the elective hospital with someone at home.
- Create an itinerary of your trip, and ensure throughout your trip that family/friends at home are aware of your whereabouts in case something goes wrong.

### **Helpful things to take**

- Oxford Handbooks – General Medicine and Tropical Medicine (if appropriate)
- Stethoscope
- Scrubs – these are really important to take as many hospitals in developing countries do not have spare scrubs for students
- White coat
- Medical personal protective gear