Follow in the footsteps of an international CLS

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Many young people today have opportunities to visit exotic places through international clubs, sports, and relief agencies. Faith-based service with contributions to missions is also a popular avenue. My latest project involved a mission hospital in Bangladesh. Friends recruited me to help establish a curriculum for a med-tech program, select text and prepare supplemental manuals, then travel to Bangladesh to teach curriculum components. My follow-up visit three years later to instruct a new class of students and check the progress of the previous class was worthwhile.

Vacations abroad are fun, but who would actually want to work so far away from home? The majority of people choosing to work internationally sees it as a means of service to a particular profession. The chance to travel to other parts of the world without paying for it can be enticing. Often, the need to fulfill social responsibilities, to experience social activism, or just to feel a renewed sense of purpose comes from immersing oneself in a different culture. At a distance from loved ones, a person gains independence and confidence while learning to connect with others.

My first experience in working as a CLS (clinical laboratory scientist) in a foreign land took place in the 1970s through the U.S. Peace Corps. Even with my full-time job at a hospital right after completing college, something was still missing. Most volunteers for Peace Corps assignments are just out of college, but older singles and couples have been known to sign up. Many of these folks are in transition — going through life changes, for example, in the way of jobs or family. Recruiters for CLS programs attract students by telling them they can literally work anywhere in the world. Visit the website for the Peace Corps at www.peacecorps.gov to see what countries have available projects in healthcare. The current list involves needs in public health education and development to combat HIV/AIDS worldwide.

For a career in the Foreign Service, the website to visit is www.careers.state.gov/specialist/opportunities/medtech.html. Regional medical technologists and CLSs need bachelor of science degrees and four years of experience as generalists. The posts are varied, from underdeveloped countries to developed countries, with an assignment of two to four years per post. Working in the Foreign Service includes cross-cultural training and a chance to see a country from the inside out.

Occasionally, professionals are only available for a short-term volunteer assignment (e.g., three to four weeks or even six months). There are several groups interested in these individuals. One is Pathologists Overseas with current projects in both Nepal and Madagascar. Funding is often available through grants. Short-term volunteer activities, however, often lead to full-time positions, if desired. A history of the organization and an explanation of project needs can be found at http://members.aol.com/pathoverc/ or http://members.aol.com/pathoverc/PDFfiles/Nepal.pdf.

Another group that serves to equip medical missions and clinics in developing countries is World Wide Lab: www.wwlab.org. The organization has staff that work on refurbishing instrumentation and also training national technicians in the use and maintenance of donated equipment once it is placed. Information about the countries the group serves, types of equipment accepted for donation, and other services can be found on the World Wide Lab website.

For the laboratory scientist wishing to expand his horizons internationally, Doctors without Borders, the U.S. Navy ship Mercy, and other organizations provide medical care to those in need — and medical care is not complete without the laboratory diagnosticians.

One of the easiest ways to start learning about these opportunities is to join the American Society for Clinical Laboratory Science (ASCLS) at www.ascls.org. This association is a member of the International Federation ofBiomedical Laboratory Scientists (IFBLS), www.ifbls.org, which serves to bring together biomedical personnel from all over the world at biennial congresses to share in development and expertise of methodologies.

So, if you have “itchy feet,” do not delay. Start sharing your wealth of expertise somewhere new!