

EDUCATION & PARENTING

Harvard Students Aid Real Medicine in India

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Two Harvard Medical School students are enjoying a study-abroad trip few others have experienced.

Fourth-year residents Tyler Chernin and Matt Oertli are only the second wave of students to travel to Jhabua, India, for a new student enrichment program that has them teaching English to village children and playing pivotal roles in the region's local HIV/AIDS care and prevention efforts.

Partnering with the Real Medicine Foundation, a Los Angeles-based humanitarian charity founded in 2005 by the pioneering Dr. Martina Fuchs, the renowned Cambridge medical school has designed the program to give students the opportunity to get real hands-on experience working with patients and Real Medicine Foundation doctors in Jhabua, which is in the state of Madhya Pradesh. The fellowship-like enrichment program is part of a growing trend that is seeing more medical students taking advantage of elective research opportunities and finding more time to travel abroad and get field experience in settings vastly different from an American hospital.

Oertli, 25, is in India now. In a phone interview with INDIA New England, Oertli said he is finding the experience more rewarding than he could have ever imagined.

"It is becoming much more common; I wanted more clinical experience outside of Boston hospitals," he said. "There is so much oversight in everything you do. Here you get

to see the medical experience in another place. [Resources are] so limited out here in India – it forces doctors to really appreciate what we have back home, and see what kind of solutions there are out there to help tackle these problems [in India]."

The study-abroad program started Jan. 12 and runs through mid-March, with exact dates tentative for any necessary travel and program uncertainties that may arise. As part of Real Medicine's mission to provide comprehensive care for patients that goes above and beyond basic health care and focuses on the whole person, including providing physical, emotional, economic and social support, Oertli and Chernin spend most mornings teaching English and science to Jhabua village children, with one or two days set aside each week to help out at the local clinic in the Jhabua District HIV/AIDS Prevention and Care Program. Here they get the chance to help out with program logistics such as filing grant proposals for new treatments, as well as following up with their patients' medical care and prevention education.

Oertli and Chernin said they first heard about the program through a fellow classmate, Kristin Castillo, who last summer was the first Harvard medical student to participate in the program.

"When Kristin came back she couldn't stop talking about it because she was so excited," said Oertli. Chernin had already spent last summer in Tibet learning about traditional medicine, and the two friends were eager to find another opportunity to stretch their skills.

One doctor who was pivotal in forging the Harvard/Real Medicine partnership is Fabian

Toegel, Real Medicine's country director for India and a former Harvard student. Toegel received his masters in public health from the university in 2006 and has an 11-year history of involvement in India beginning with his work for the Peace Corps.

"I met up with my old professor and suggested to have the students come work on the project with me in India," said Toegel, who is RMF's India country director.

"I'm really thrilled – having this affiliation makes me really proud," he said. "Harvard obviously turns out incredibly smart, gifted people that can be very open about their experience. Feedback is very useful to understand our project and see where we can take it."

Real Medicine Foundation's founder and president, who started the organization after treating victims from the 2004 Sri Lanka tsunami by banding together a network of fiercely humanitarian physicians, was equally effusive on the newly established partnership with Harvard and isn't shy about being hopeful regarding future plans to collaborate with the university.

"We now work in 13 countries, but started



Photo courtesy Real Medicine Foundation

In addition to practicing medicine in the field, Harvard Medical School student Matt Oertli teaches the children of Jhabua, India, to speak English.

out in disaster areas, or areas that start out poor, or are hit by a disaster," said Fuchs. "It [the partnership with Harvard] is fantastic for us and great for them, as well. We have the beginnings of a fellowship program right now ... it would be fantastic if we could do this on an ongoing basis – say every eight weeks or so, rolling. To really dream is to wonder if we could someday expand this to other programs throughout the world. The more help we get, the more people we can help."

For more on the Real Medicine Foundation, call (800) 450-7484, e-mail info@realmedicinefoundation.org or visit www.realmedicinefoundation.org.