

A practical guide to undertaking out of programme experience in the United States of America

Why do out of programme experience?

Since the introduction of Modernising Medical Careers in 2007, training within most specialties has become less diverse with trainees within the same region often gaining similar clinical experience. Newly-employed consultants are expected to bring new skills and experiences to a department, which can be in the form of research, experience in another specialty, different skill-sets, knowledge of different institutions' practices or postgraduate degrees. Experience at an institution abroad can be very beneficial, and generates much interest and discussion at interview. These experiences reflect trainees' enthusiasm for their specialty and significantly increase the clinical and research profile of a department.

Out of programme career break or out of programme experience?

A period of training abroad can be used to count towards one's Certificate of Completion of Training if prospectively approved by the Royal college. The deanery may also grant the time abroad as a career break. The decision about whether to undertake an out of programme experience or out of programme career break will depend on the candidate's age, dependents, previous clinical experience and the likely clinical and research experience that will be gained within the post.

Why do an out of programme experience in USA?

With over 309 million people, the United States of America is the third largest country in the world by land area and population. The American health-care system far outspends any other nation, measured in

both per capita spending and percentage of gross domestic product (Anderson and Hussey, 2001). The USA is a leader in medical innovation. In 2004, the non-industrial sector spent three times as much as Europe per capita on biomedical research (Groves, 2008).

Unlike many developed countries, health-care coverage in the USA is not universal. Local governments provide free basic health care, which is usually supplemented by either private insurance or employer-sponsored health insurance. The subject of uninsured and underinsured Americans is a major political issue (Blewett et al, 2006). A 2009 study estimated that lack of insurance is associated with nearly 45 000 deaths a year (Wilper, 2009). In 2006, Massachusetts became the first state to mandate universal health insurance. Legislation passed in 2010 will create a near-universal health insurance system around the country by 2014, in addition to already existing federal programmes such as Medicare (for the elderly) and Medicaid (for the poor).

Gaining experience in the American medical system will allow UK trainees to compare and contrast health-care provision to that of the NHS. The American medical system offers many specialized fellowships following residency for sub-specialty training – equivalent to ST6 and above in the UK. An out of programme experience in the USA provides the trainee with insight into the demands of running an efficient health system in addition to learning new procedures and techniques.

Arranging out of programme experience

Regulations differ among states within the USA, but the four basic requirements to

work in America are: a job offer, a work visa, a social security number and a medical licence or a temporary licence exemption. The latter two can only be arranged when you are actually in America. Medical license regulations are state-specific and not required in all states within the USA. Some departments require the trainee to have passed their United States Medical Licensing Examination exams (www.usmle.org) before application. This requirement depends on the stage of training and whether an exit examination has been completed. In some states, one can apply for a medical license exemption if one holds the exit exams for medicine or surgery, or the Final FRCA in anaesthetics.

Finding a job

There are a number of ways of finding and arranging a post abroad:

1. Find a contact (consultant or colleague) within your institution or another UK hospital. Many UK consultants and trainees have had previous work experience or contacts at American institutions
2. Search out a sub-speciality of interest, and find their organization or society's website online. Most sub-speciality societies post a list of institutions that offer fellowship jobs and sub-speciality training
3. Write to an institution independently with a CV to arrange an interview
4. Attend American and international meetings to facilitate meeting faculty members of desired American institutions to learn about posts and opportunities offered.

Visa application

Once the above paperwork has been provided, the sponsoring department will apply for a petition for a working visa (J1 or H1B) lasting 1–2 years.

Following approval of the visa petition, the applicant will receive an I-797B notice of action. An appointment with the US embassy in the UK is subsequently sought. Calls to the embassy cost £1.50/minute and the appointment costs £120. It usu-

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ally takes approximately 2 weeks from the time of calling to obtain an appointment. Processing paperwork usually takes an additional 3–4 weeks. Progress of the application can be monitored online and after sending the original passport to the embassy for the visa to be stamped, it may take a further 1–2 weeks to be returned.

Before leaving

There is much organization required before going to work abroad, particularly if one is a home owner. Medical defence society membership should be suspended during the period away from the UK. Medical insurance is usually covered by the employing American hospital.

Until a US dollar bank account is set up, one relies heavily on credit cards and these can charge 2% extra on any transaction made abroad. Some banks allow dollar accounts to be set up before arrival in America at a cost of approximately £50, while other banks allow an account to be opened in the country without a social security number.

Paperwork for a medical license exemption

Although you cannot apply for this until you receive a social security number, which requires you to reside in the USA, you will need to ensure you have the correct documents. If a medical license exemption is required, some of the documents which must be provided include:

- References
- Letter of good standing from the General Medical Council
- Letter from regional advisor confirming satisfactory completion of 4 years post-graduate training
- Names and addresses of all previous heads of departments at which the candidate was employed
- Logbook details
- Passport photographs (different to those in the UK)
- Certified copy of medical school diploma (with translation in English if in Latin)
- Verification of medical school degree (letter from medical school to employing hospital)
- Notary Public certification of application (costs approximately £50) photo and signature.

Entry into the USA

Upon entry into the USA, the Department of Homeland Security will ask for an I-94 card which can be completed at the airport. There are a number of priorities to organize upon arrival in the USA, which include:

Social security number

This can only be applied for after arrival in the USA. One cannot be paid or apply for a medical license without this and many transactions (phone, bank account and insurance) require this. Despite this, the arriving applicant is advised to wait for 10 working days to be cleared by homeland security before seeking a social security number otherwise the application can be complicated by lack of homeland clearance and can be delayed by an extra 4 weeks.

Medical license (exemption)

This can take 1–2 months. One may be added to the payroll while waiting for this but no clinical work can be performed, i.e. no patient contact is allowed. However, this delay may give you the opportunity to start research projects and apply for Institutional Review Board (ethics committee) approval. Be aware that if you are added to the payroll, you will have to make up the on-call shifts that you should have done during that period once your medical license is obtained.

Driver's licence

Although by law the UK driving licence can be used for up to a period of 1 year, an American driver's licence is needed in order to be insured for longer than 1 month. In addition to this, the licence is a very useful form of ID. You need a social security number and the appropriate visa in order to sit the driving test.

Other tips for a smooth transition into the American medical system

Occupational health clearance may require a chest X-ray for tuberculosis clearance, evidence of adequate vaccinations, and some hospitals require drug testing. Most vaccinations and blood tests from British hospitals are accepted in the USA.

Be aware that patented (trade-name) drug names are often used in the US rather than generic names. Thus a British

National Formulary and the iPhone application eocrates (if you type in a patented drug name it tells you the generic names and doses for any drug) are very useful in the authors' experience.

UK citizens are entitled to up to 2 years' tax exemption. However, if you decide to stay longer, the tax must be repaid in full to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).

Conclusions

An out of programme experience in the USA can be a long process that requires forward planning, organization and patience. The process can also initially be expensive, so financial planning to cover expenses in the time period between UK and US jobs must be considered. However, the experience can be invaluable, challenging and extremely rewarding. A job abroad can make any CV stand out at the highest level and lends itself to interesting discussions at consultant job interviews. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.

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KEY POINTS

- Undertaking out of programme experience or an out of programme career break in America can make a CV stand out at the highest level.
- The four basic requirements to work in America are: a job offer, a work visa, a social security number and a medical license (or license exemption).
- Experience of the American health system allows UK trainees to compare and contrast health-care provision to that of the NHS.
- The process can be initially expensive and needs financial planning to cover expenses.
- Set up a US dollar bank account before arrival.
- Wait 10 working days after arrival before applying for a social security number.