**INTRODUCTION**

Going on a medical elective is an exciting opportunity. No matter where the destination, for most people it is an intensely rewarding experience, and the memories last a lifetime. However poor preparation can impinge on an otherwise productive elective, leading to lost opportunities. A little time spent considering your options will be time well spent.

**THINGS TO CONSIDER**

If this is your first time going on elective, you should talk to someone who already has some experience. Ask around your medical school or hospital. Ideally you should try to find someone who has already been to the hospital or project you are interested in.

Going in a group is easier than going alone. It can be an intense experience, and it is comforting to have someone you can relate to. It also helps when it comes to getting to know people when you arrive. Going it alone is the more challenging option, but can be a more interesting experience. Remember though that in remote areas in some countries it can be almost impossible to contact family and friends.

See if there are any local organizations which might provide sponsorship. Start your own volunteer group if you have the time. Choose a project which suits you, and do some research before you go. Many people decide to visit a developing country - it's not often that you have the chance to experience another culture while also providing benefits for the place you visit. Find travel information about the country, and get an idea of how the health system works there. Decide what skills you have to offer, and what time period you have free.

**ORGANIZING THE TRIP**

Make a shortlist of your preferred volunteer opportunities. Email or write the contact person, with any questions you have, and the dates you intend to go. Tell them how many are in your group, and what skills you can offer. If you are accepted in one placement, don't forget to let the others know you won't be coming. Once you have a confirmation, book your flights as soon as possible. If you are a student, try for student deals. For any obscure destinations, ask the contact person if they know which airlines fly there, or go to a specialized travel agent. As always the Internet is a good place to search for cheap airfares!

In the developing world, many hospitals are in financial difficulty, so any aid you can provide may literally be life-saving. Write to local businesses, medical organizations, or your local political representative for donations. Do not forget to hit up the other staff members in your local hospital/clinic who may have worked in the developing world in the past. Organize fund-raising events (coffee mornings, bag-packing, raffles, pub quizzes), and ask your local hospital if they have any equipment to spare. Bear in mind that some of the archaic stuff may not be suitable, while the stuff you think is useless may actually be a godsend... it is difficult to estimate this yourself but do make a serious effort to establish the level at which your hospital functions.

Pharmacies and GPs will also donate left-over or sample medications. You may receive some that are past sell-by date, but check with your contact person if these are useful. Unfortunately some hospitals charge patients even for donated drugs and this can be upsetting for volunteers who brought the drugs in good faith, not expecting them to be beyond their targeted patients' means... Again, check before you go.

Do not forget to see what the visa requirements are for your destination. Contact the embassy if you are unsure. Make copies of your passport, tickets, and other travel documents, and strongly consider travel insurance (if you're off to a remote destination check if you need extra cover in case you need the local flying
Dr. Shane O’Hanlon (MB, BCh, BAO, BMedSci, MRCPI) is a specialist registrar in geriatric medicine at the Cork University Hospital in Ireland. As a student he went on electives to Africa, the Caribbean, France and Spain. This article gives some advice on how to go about organizing your elective, no matter what the destination.