

Internships at the World Health Organization, Leader in International Public Health

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THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

Over the past century, we have witnessed the eradication of smallpox, drastic reductions in the global incidence of polio, and highly coordinated international responses to control the spread of dangerous infectious diseases, like H1N1 influenza. At the centre of these successes stands the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations' coordinating authority on international public health. Since its inception on 7 April 1948, WHO has been a leader in international public health, employing over 8,000 people from various educational backgrounds, including medicine, epidemiology, public health, finance, and administration. Today, it remains one of the largest collections of technical expertise regarding health issues and continues to lead many international public health efforts.

ORGANIZATION OF THE ORGANIZATION

WHO is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, and has six regional offices—Regional Office for Africa (AFRO), the Americas (AMRO, also known as the Pan-American Health Organization – PAHO), Southeast Asia (SEARO), Europe (EURO), the Eastern Mediterranean (EMRO), and the Western Pacific (WPRO). The World Health Assembly (WHA) is the highest decision-making body of WHO, and delegations from each of the 193 member states convene yearly in Geneva in May. At WHO headquarters, activities are broadly divided into eight clusters – such as HIV/AIDS, TB, Malaria and Neglected Tropical Diseases; Information, Evidence, and Research; and Health Systems and Services – with numerous departments in each cluster focusing on more specific areas of technical expertise.

INTERNSHIPS AT WHO

Internships with WHO are available to individuals who are pursuing graduate studies and last for 6-12 weeks, though they can be extended up to 24 weeks in special circumstances. Applications are made to a specific cluster within WHO, and opportunities are available at WHO headquarters, as well as any of the regional offices. The application process is very competitive, as approximately 260 interns were selected from over 8,400

applications for the summer of 2009, so it is highly recommended that applications be made once the positions become available (i.e., December 1 for summer internships and August 1 for winter internships).

Numerous medical students have undertaken internships with WHO. For three months, I worked in Geneva with the Evidence-Informed Policy Networks (EVIPNet) Program, in the Department of Research Policy and Cooperation, on several projects, including a study to document efforts being made to encourage the use of research evidence to inform health policymaking in 11 African jurisdictions. Partway through my internship, I also became involved with the Department of Food Safety and Zoonoses, as they worked towards building a program in knowledge-translation. Another medical student also served as an intern this past summer, working with the Alliance for Health Policy and Services Research (Alliance HPSR). With guidance from Dr. Kent Ranson, she performed a systematic review on universal coverage mechanisms in high-income countries.

I believe that the WHO internship was an extraordinary and worthwhile experience, especially for those with an interest in international health. It was a great opportunity to work with and meet individuals who are leaders in their respective fields, and also other interns from around the world with similar interests. Unfortunately, the WHO does not provide any payment or scholarship to its interns. So, those interested in applying for internships should investigate potential sources of funding. Diane and I found funding opportunities through our universities by contacting individuals familiar with student awards and financial aid. Time spent in Geneva is hardly inexpensive, and aside from the cost of getting there, you can expect to spend between 1,000 to 1,500 CAD a month on rent and an additional 1,500 CAD per month on food, travel and other expenses.

For more information regarding WHO and its internships, please consult the following website:

WHO: <http://www.who.int>.

WHO Internships:

<http://www.who.int/employment/internship/en/>

Those who have a particular interest in the field of health policy and systems research are encouraged to check out the website of the Alliance HPSR (<http://www.who.int/alliance-hpsr/en/>) or to contact Dr. Kent Ranson directly (ransonm@who.int). 

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