



Cultural Sensitivity Guide: Volunteer Edition

We hope that you are excited for your upcoming MEDLIFE trip! The purpose of this guide is to equip you with the understanding, knowledge, and perspective to be the most effective volunteer you can be during your trip. This, in turn, will better empower MEDLIFE to bring Medicine, Education and Development to Low-Income Families Everywhere.

Before we begin, it's important to understand that...

At the roll of a die, you have been born into circumstances of relative privilege.

Based on your access to an education, healthcare and other tangible resources, you enter this space from a place of relative privilege. It's often easy to forget that resources like clean water, sanitary bathrooms and medicine that we consider to be necessities or givens are actually privileges.

You are coming on a MEDLIFE trip for a variety of reasons, but we're willing to bet one of them is that you have a desire to help others.

Our hope is that you want to be part of the movement to alleviate poverty and promote more widespread access to high-quality healthcare. However, it's important to keep in mind that as you embark on this adventure to help others, you have a responsibility to be culturally sensitive while doing so. It's important to remember that privilege is not synonymous with progress and poverty is not a signal of cultural backwardness or inferiority. Therefore, seeing this kind of inequality should not produce a sense of cultural superiority or exceptionalism. Extreme poverty is not one dimensional, rather it is a product of a complex interplay of structural inequalities.

Sometimes, without meaning to or thinking about it, good-hearted volunteers and aid workers belittle and even hurt the very people that they want to help.

Certain speech, body language, and behaviors that are exercised freely in our home countries can come off as uninviting, brash, or insensitive. In consequence, this can dissuade patients from seeking MEDLIFE's support.

Sometimes we can be culturally insensitive without intending to or realizing it.

Place yourself in the shoes of this patient:

You've never received medical care before. However, for the past 6 months you've had terrible chest pain. It's almost so bad that you cannot work, so you decide after much debate to attend a nearby MEDLIFE mobile clinic. You are uneasy about the idea of modern medicine, because you've had scary experiences with doctors in the past.

You arrive to the clinic, and see that it is run by dozens of foreign people. They're speaking in English loudly and are laughing while looking at you. Although they're smiling, you become extremely uncomfortable. You speak only Spanish, and have no idea what they're saying. Are they talking about you? Are they mocking you because of your appearance or medical condition? You don't know. You realize that you are absolutely terrified to be here.

You sit down at the first station, and immediately a volunteer approaches your head with a device you've never seen before. You try to move away from it, because you have no clue what it is going to do. Will it hurt? What is it for? Without your permission or understanding, the volunteer presses the device against your forehead for a few long moments before it beeps. The volunteer writes numbers you cannot read onto a piece of paper. She then walks you to the next place you are supposed to go.

Unfortunately, the scenario outlined above occurs quite frequently.

How could this patient's discomfort and fear have been curbed by the volunteers?

What did the volunteers do well in this scenario?



What could these volunteers improve on?	What did these volunteers do well?
1. Try to speak in the local language. Refer to the language cheat sheets given to you or ask a MEDLIFE staff member to write down a few key phrases for you to use. Patients will deeply appreciate you trying to speak in the local language to help ease cultural and language barriers.	1. They made sure to smile! A smile is your absolute best tool, as it communicates a desire to help and encourages patients to feel at ease.
2. Always try to communicate with the patient about what will happen next during their mobile clinic experience. A thermometer, blood pressure cuff, or dentist’s suction may look scary if you’ve never seen it before and its purpose hasn’t been explained to you. “Try out” the thermometer or cuffs on yourself to reassure the patients the tools won’t hurt. Also, remember that body language is something we all have in common!	2. They did not give medical advice or comment on the patient’s temperature reading. The volunteers ensured that they were at no point giving medical advice to patients or making them feel uneasy if their temperature, blood pressure, etc. was abnormal.
3. Please try to keep your speech and conversations at a reasonable volume and animation level. Keep in mind that if you wouldn’t act or speak a certain way in a doctor’s office back home, it’s not appropriate in your mobile clinic abroad either.	3. They walked the patient to his or her next station.

Alcohol use during the week:

Remember that how you act reflects upon MEDLIFE, your home country, and your university both at night and during the day. Uphold your values and knowledge of cultural sensitivity all week, not just while working in clinic or at the project site. **Keep in mind that in the places MEDLIFE works, people generally do not drink to get drunk.** Alcohol is drunk socially. **If you get drunk in some of these areas, you’re not only making yourself and your group a target for unwanted attention, you’re oftentimes reinforcing negative stereotypes of international visitors.** It is expected that you will not abuse alcohol or use illicit drugs during your MEDLIFE trip.

Be conscious of your word choice:

Instead of using the term “poor people,” use the following alternatives that place their **humanity** first. The same can be applied to any of our patients with disabilities.

- “People/communities experiencing poverty”
- “People affected by poverty/ a disability”
- “Marginalized people/communities”
- “Economically depressed area”

Photography during mobile clinics:

It is strictly prohibited for volunteers to take pictures of a patient being treated or while the patient is at a station.

If, during a time a patient is not being treated, you would like to take a picture, make sure to get verbal consent from the person whose photo you’re taking.

If you’d like to take a child’s picture, ensure that you get verbal consent from one of the child’s parents first.



Other notes:

1. Making patients feel comfortable is priority #1

Remember that this mobile clinic experience isn't truly about you, it's about the people you're serving.

2. Do not give candy, food or money to children

This will cause fights and unfair distribution as there are too many children for you to give something to each child. In our home countries, we teach children not to accept gifts from strangers. We, as strangers, should not offer them. Also, distributing food or money only demonstrates the difference between "those who have" and "those who have not." Giving children handouts is not a sustainable practice and creates a cycle of dependency if done too often.

3. Do not pet or feed animals

Remember that animals are unpredictable. One can never be sure whether or not they have rashes, diseases, or a bad temperament. Keep in mind that animals may also bite.

4. If you're offered a snack or drink as a 'thank you,' especially while working on project, take it.

Denying, throwing away, or seeming unappreciative of a gift of food or drink is seen as extremely rude. At the very least, take a couple sips or bites of whatever is given to you and wait to dispose of it once you have left the area.

5. Avoid snap judgements.

Poverty is an extremely complex issue. It's impossible to understand the extensive contributing factors of many of our patients' struggles at first glance. Therefore, try to withhold judgements and curb assumptions and instead try reflecting with a peer later about what you experienced.

6. Know that you won't change everything you want to during your trip.

Remember that part of the beauty of your trip experience is that you are here to learn and become more aware of the world around you and how you can help. Your work and mission will continue even after you return home! Social change does not happen overnight.

It is never appropriate for a volunteer to perform a medical procedure of any kind.

Would you be comfortable having an undergraduate in their 20s perform your pap smear?

Would you let a first year medical student prescribe medicine to your child?

Would you be okay with having a non-medically trained stranger fill your cavity?

In all likelihood, your answer to the above questions is a vehement **no**.

In our home countries, we expect all of our medical procedures to be performed by licensed, capable medical professionals. Just because our patients live in areas affected by poverty does not make them any less deserving of this same level of high-quality care.

MEDLIFE believes that access to high-quality healthcare is a basic human right. Medical care is of high quality when it is provided by trained professionals, which are our locally hired doctors.

With this in mind, know that you will not be performing any type of medical procedure during your mobile clinic. If one of our doctors or nurses offers an opportunity to perform some kind of procedure, MEDLIFE as a whole does and will not condone this and would like to be notified as soon as possible.

Remember: The way you act for the day or even an hour can forever influence the way people perceive MEDLIFE, modern medicine, and the public health system.

