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Education concerning HIV & elective attachments is the responsibility of Medical Schools

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Rapid Response:

Education concerning HIV & elective attachments is the responsibility of Medical Schools

EDITOR:

Tai and Nielson's trauma unit should be commended for their efforts to protect foreign students from HIV during their elective attachments. They describe an induction package for students concerning needle-stick injuries as well as 24 hour support from an HIV specialist nurse and immediate availability of HIV post exposure prophylaxis. It is useful for foreign students to know the support that will be available to them during their elective attachment in the trauma unit at Johannesburg General Hospital. (1)

However, their argument that the above measures should be regarded as a minimum for any institution hosting elective medical students is unrealistic at present. This needs development over time.

Whilst it may be possible for larger institutions to have such procedures and measures in place, smaller rural host hospitals may find it difficult or impossible to comply with Tai and Nielson's recommendations.

Many students undertake electives in rural communities and hospitals where such comprehensive education packages and post-exposure support may not be fully available. These communities may not have availability of post-exposure prophylaxis for their own permanent staff, or anti-retroviral therapy for patients in the local community. If the lack of these measures were to deter medical students from completing their elective attachments in such communities then extremely valuable experiences will be lost.

Tilzey and Banatvala describe updated medical school policies concerning HIV protection on electives. (2)

Medical schools sending students on elective attachments should ensure that, prior to departure, students are fully informed about the management of needle stick injuries and post exposure prophylaxis as well as many other issues concerning electives in foreign countries, including malaria and other tropical diseases, personal safety, high-risk surgical procedures and responsibilities of students, who are not yet fully qualified doctors, to recognise their limitations in a foreign environment.

Planning for the elective attachment should be an integral part of any medical school curriculum. Despatching medical schools have a responsibility to ensure that students are as well prepared as possible prior to their elective attachments. This must not be devolved to the host

institutions unless a clear education and support package exists for students in their new environment.

(1) Tai NRM, Nielson S, Boffard K. Host should also protect students on elective from HIV. *BMJ* 2003;326:338 (8 February)

(2) Tilzey AJ, Banatvala JE. Protection from HIV on electives: questionnaire study of UK medical schools. *BMJ* 2003;325:1010-1 (2 November)

Competing interests:

None declared

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