

Volunteer Work in Dermatology

By Dr. Cather McKay



“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” — Mahatma Gandhi

Most physicians were drawn to medicine by the desire to help others. Volunteer work can fulfill our altruistic need and challenge our clinical skills in settings with limited resources. There are opportunities to give back around the corner or around the world, depending on your interests, goals, and availability.

Local Opportunities

Volunteering in your community is often the best place to start. You may wish to partner with an established charity clinic or host an event in conjunction with a larger organization.

Find **local free or sliding scale clinics** through the [National Association of Free & Charitable Clinics](#). Volunteer work could include treating patients at the charity clinic or seeing referrals in your clinic at no or discounted cost.

Alternatively, utilizing programs already in place through the groups below, among others, allows you to travel regionally or bring high-quality events to your own community.

[Women’s Dermatologic Society \(WDS\) Community Outreach¹:](#)

- The **WDS Play Safe in the Sun Program** organizes 3-4 large skin cancer screenings per year across the country. As an extension, the **Coast-2-Coast Program** promotes member-driven outreach with toolkits for local screenings.

- Members can host educational events at local women’s shelters through the successful **Transforming Interconnecting Project Program (TIPP)**. The WDS provides advertising, goodie bags, catering, and ready-to-use PowerPoint presentations.

[American Academy of Dermatology \(AAD\) Volunteer Opportunities²:](#)

- The AAD’s **SPOT Skin Cancer Screening Program** provides free screening forms, patient handouts, posters, and advertising assistance, to members.
- **Camp Discovery** offers children with chronic skin conditions a weeklong camp experience at no charge. Each year there are six weeks of camp in five locations across the country. Volunteer applications are available beginning in mid-January of each year.

[American Society for Dermatologic Surgeons \(ASDS\) Public Service Programs³:](#)

- Through **Choose Skin Health**, members plan skin cancer screenings and are provided forms, sunscreen samples, patient education and advertising materials.
- Motivated members can educate their communities about sun protection and skin cancer detection through the **Stylists Against Skin Cancer**, **Sun Safe Soccer**, and **Sun Safe Surfing** programs.

Volunteering Abroad

Volunteering abroad presents its own challenges and rewards alike. Several organizations exist aiming to improve access to dermatologic care in resource-limited regions of the world through volunteerism and education.

The [International Foundation for Dermatology \(IFD\)](#), created by the International League of Dermatological Societies (ILDS), supports a variety of projects around the world. The ILDS also puts on the World Skin Summit and the World Congress of Dermatology annually.

The [International Alliance for Global Health Dermatology \(GLODERM\)](#) connects dermatologists and trainees with opportunities, mentorship, and education. Webinars are free online and the group meets prior to the annual AAD conference. An additional educational resource is the **WHO’s training guide [Recognizing neglected tropical diseases through changes on the skin](#)** which is available for free download⁴.

[Health Volunteers Overseas \(HVO\)](#) places volunteer educators in teaching hospitals or universities around the world to provide clinical and/or didactic instruction for students, residents, and faculty during their trip. Currently there are dermatology opportunities in Cambodia, Costa Rica, Nepal, Uganda, and Vietnam.

Medical mission trips are yet another popular means to volunteer abroad. Groups such as [Dermatology Medical Missions](#), [Rotary International](#), [Christian Medical & Dental Associations](#), or local medical societies or churches, are all potential avenues to get involved in mission work.

Practical Concerns

- **Liability and Scope of Practice:** Federally, the *Volunteer Protection Act of 1997* and the Free Clinic Federal Tort Claims Act (FTCA) Medical Malpractice Program provide protection for volunteers at qualifying clinics⁵. Most states also assure a degree of limited liability or immunity. There are certain requirements; if unclear, the clinic or your malpractice insurance carrier may be able to clarify. Site coordinators for international trips should provide this information. In general, fear of liability should not be a deterrent to volunteer work.
- **Cost:** Cost will depend on the setting and time committed. Certain programs cover travel expenses. When traveling abroad, consider grants or fundraisers to offset costs. For example, the **AAD** funds the **Resident International Grant** as well as a **grant for HVO volunteers**.
- **Lack of resources or supplies:** Charity clinics often use donated supplies or may have a small budget for necessities. If you volunteer at a clinic other than your own, you may wish to bring supplies. Seeing patients in your own practice will avoid this issue. When working abroad, access to resources will vary widely. The **AAD Skin Care for Developing Countries Grant** and the **ILDS DermLink** small grants program may be able to help.
- **Access to medications:** In the US, many brand name medications are accessible through **patient assistance programs** (PAPs) directly through manufacturers. **The Pharmacy Connection** is one database that streamlines applications. Additional resources include GoodRx and pharmacy discount lists.
- **Access to diagnostic testing:** Oftentimes pathology groups, hospitals, and imaging centers have discounted, sliding scale, or even free testing for those who qualify. Try to ensure before ordering to avoid patients receiving a large bill.
- **Time commitment:** Decide prior to signing up for volunteer work the amount of time or services you can realistically offer. Set boundaries so as not to overextend yourself or compromise your work or family life.
- **Safety:** Traveling abroad is not without risks. Choosing well-established organizations can help ensure safe and reliable transportation, lodging, and security, if needed. Check the CDC website to ensure you have any required vaccinations or prophylactic medications you may need. Consider the [Smart Traveler Enrollment Program](#) (STEP) for easier connection with the local US Embassy if needed.

Volunteer work can be immensely rewarding for both the volunteer and those in need. The information above is far from exhaustive. Finding a mentor and starting with small commitments can improve your experience. Best of luck and happy volunteering!

References

1. Women's Dermatologic Society: <https://www.womensderm.org/community>
2. American Academy of Dermatology: <https://www.aad.org/member/career/volunteer>
3. American Society for Dermatologic Surgeons: <https://www.asds.net/medical-professionals/public-service-programs>
4. Asiedu K, ed. Recognizing neglected tropical diseases through changes on the skin: A training guide for front-line health workers. World Health Organization; 2018. Accessed August 12, 2022: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241513531>
5. Lisa Benrud, Jacqueline Darrah, and Alison Johnson. Liability Considerations for Physician Volunteers in the U.S. *Virtual Mentor*. 2010;12(3):207-212. doi: 10.1001/virtualmentor.2010.12.3.hlaw1-1003.