PARTNERS FOR
RURAL HEALTH IN THE
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

VOLUNTEER ORIENTATION MANUAL

Trip Leadership:

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Hola! Welcome to the Dominican Republic Health Outreach Project. You are about to embark on a trip that offers many rewards. For students, it is a chance to hone clinical skills under the watchful eye of nursing veterans as well as to experience life and work in a different culture. The project gives volunteers a chance to share their knowledge with nursing novices and to serve people in need; in some cases, they'll see patients they've treated for years. The perspective you gain may well change the way you think about your own culture. Every one's experience will be unique.

This manual is meant to help you plan for your trip. It is by no means complete. Please share your suggestions for additions or revisions with faculty.

The Project’s History

This project is the result of a meeting between Dr. Anne Keith, then a member of the University of Maine College of Nursing’s faculty, and Dr. John Consoli, a physician who works in Boston. Dr. Keith was in the Dominican Republic on a mission organized by Intercultural Nursing Inc. Their chance conversation about the area’s health needs turned into a partnership that now spans over 20 years. It began with eight USM nursing students and several interpreters traveling to the Dominican Republic in 1995. Theirs was the first group to stay at Fusimana, the missionary center in the DR that Dr. Consoli and his wife, Jessica are affiliated with.

That first venture has turned into a bi-annual medical mission. USM nursing students and faculty, along with a host of volunteers, now provide personal care and health education to more than 1,500 patients in 20 rural villages. Each day, the team – often made up of as many as 75 people – work in homes, schools or chapels. They treat injuries, infection, and chronic health problems. They also teach nutrition, dental hygiene, and health education. Students assist in raising funds to purchase medical supplies for each trip.

To date, USM’s Dominican Republic Health Outreach Project has served more than 15,000 patients.
**Ho do I take part in the medical mission?**

Volunteers interested in taking part in this program should email a Letter of Intent to trip leader: Whitney Lutz. The Letter of Intent can be found on our website at: [www.prhdr.org](http://www.prhdr.org) under the title “Becoming a Volunteer”. Be sure to indicate whether you speak any Spanish; though it is not required, language skill at any level is helpful. Your letter of intent should include a brief biographical sketch.

**When do I apply?**

Applications are reviewed about four months before each trip in January and July.

**The project is headquartered at a Catholic retreat center in Lajas. Do I have to be Catholic to participate?**

No, though you will be asked to respect the religious nature of the center, known as Fusimana. Someone will say grace before the evening meal. Mass is offered weekly at a nearby church and occasionally at Fusimana, though you are not required to attend. Our village clinics serve people of all faiths. Church leaders are accountable for the results of our work, and we respect their guidance and culture at all times. We use the model of promoting public health in faith communities.

**Do I have to speak Spanish?**

No, although it’s certainly a great advantage. We will have interpreters on the trip, so it is possible to go without knowing the language. But we strongly recommend you learn some Spanish before the trip. Knowing even a little can make a difference when working with patients.

**Where can I learn Spanish?**

Portland Adult Education: 874-8160


**Do I have to be in good physical shape?**
This is a very demanding work experience. You will find that there is some lifting, climbing in and out of vehicles, and walking over various types of terrain, as well as working 10 - 12 hour days. We recommend that you walk one to two miles each day at least a month prior to the trip. Please include any physical limitations in your letter of application. A brief medical and emergency contact form is required by PRHDR

**Getting There**

**Will we meet before the trip?**

Yes. You will meet with faculty and the other members of the team for an orientation about 1 month before the trip. This helps to prepare you, answer your questions and give you an opportunity to begin team building.

- Arrangements for travel by plane, by bus, and SUVs
- Where you will stay
- Required vaccines and the risk of exposure to tropical diseases
- The risk of accidents
- Team building, group functioning, and safety issues
- Participate in packing up the medications

**Do I need a passport for this trip?**

Yes. Non-U.S. citizens must also have current documents, and some will need a special visa from the Dominican Consulate in Boston. PRDHR will need copies of all of these documents.

**How do I get a passport?**

For the most up-to-date information as well as all the appropriate forms, visit the U.S. Department of State's website at [travel.state.gov](http://travel.state.gov). In a nutshell, if you’re applying for a passport for the first time, you’ll need to appear in person at a passport processing center, typically a post office or courthouse (you can search for them by zip code at the State Department website). You’ll have to bring a photographs of yourself that meets passport requirements; you can have it taken at places like a Fed Ex Office, Wal-Mart,
or even some post offices for a nominal fee. You’ll also need to bring proof of U.S. citizenship, such as an original birth certificate, not a photocopy, and a valid form of photo identification, such as a driver’s license. As of April 2015, a first-time passport costs $135, payable by credit card, check, or cash. It takes about four to six weeks for the application to be processed. Expedited service is available, but you’ll pay about $60 extra plus the cost of shipping.

If you have a passport that has expired, you can renew it by mail provided it was issued within the last 15 years. Details are at travel.state.gov.

**What immunizations do I need?**

The College of Nursing requires that you follow recommendations issued by the Centers for Disease Control. That means that you must be up-to-date on the following:

- Diphtheria-tetanus (with pertussis if booster is due)
- Typhoid (either oral live vaccine or killed injectable vaccine)
- Hepatitis A
- Polio and MMR (if you had this as a child long ago, a booster is recommended)
- Tuberculosis screening within one year

Malaria prophylaxis should be considered based on CDC recommendations, though we have seen no cases in our area of the Dominican Republic. Malaria is sensitive to chloroquine in the DR. A different mosquito (a day biter) carries Dengue viral fever, which is spreading in the DR. DEET insect repellent and cover-up clothing can reduce your exposure. For more information, read the CDC’s advisories for travelers at www.cdc.gov/travel/. You should allow at least two months to complete the required immunizations.

Call the City of Portland Public Health, which offers an excellent vaccine service as well as tuberculosis skin tests through its Infectious Disease Program at 103 India St. This service is open to everyone, regardless of residence, though an appointment is required. Call 874-8446 for an appointment or up-to-date information on fees.

**Do I need to carry special health insurance?**

Yes. You must have coverage specifically for health care and medical evacuation abroad. If you are injured, it is important to have a means to secure safe and reliable medical care and transport home. You will be exposed to tropical diseases and the potential for accidents, as is always true when traveling in developing countries. PRHDR will purchase a basic policy for you for medical evacuation insurance.

**What should I bring?**

Packing
Here’s the short answer: not nearly as much as you might think. The lighter you pack, the more comfortable you and your roommate(s) will be in your room – and the more medical supplies you can carry when you board the plane. It’s a good idea to talk with your roommate first to decide who will bring what. You might also want to pack your bags with the idea that you’ll leave behind some items when you leave, such as bedding or shoes that are in good shape, toiletries, bug spray, and unopened snack foods. Anything we leave behind is gratefully accepted by the Peace Corps volunteers who serve as our interpreters, as well as the Fusimana staff.

OK. So really, what should I pack?

Three days’ worth of clothes, max. You’ll need suitably clothes for working in the clinics (more on the dress code to follow). One of the perks of Fusimana is the terrific laundry service provided by the center’s staff. Make sure you’ve labeled your clothes so that you can put them into big laundry bags. The staff will do all of the wash and have it back to you within two days, often within 24 hours. They do ask that you wash your own underwear, so you might want to bring a small bottle of cold water detergent and a universal stopper for scrubbing in the sink. (By the way, gratuities for the staff are included in the fees you pay.)

Here’s a basic packing list:

- Insect repellent (preferably w/DEET) for your skin – essential!
- Insect spray for ants, roaches and bed bugs
- Alarm clock
- Shampoo & Soap or Body Wash (unscented if you’d like to deter mosquitos)
- Ziploc bags for personal use
- Sunscreen
- Hand Sanitizer
- Roll of Duct Tape
- Mosquito netting (as back up), also command hooks and Para cord (are useful for fastening mosquito netting)
- Deck of Cards/Travel Games/Cribbage (you will have down time at night)
- Bath mats/towel (showers can leak – these will help keep your floor clean)

Above italicized list can be shared expenses among roommates
- Fanny pack for passport, money, camera (wear daily)
- Passport (to be kept with you at all times)
- Copy of your Health Insurance Card ad passport
- Camera with memory card and batteries (there is often electricity to charge batteries)
- Water container, quart or 2-cup with sturdy top
- Optional: thin sleeping bag/light blanket, and pillow (a compressible down one is great because the pillows tend to be very thin there)
- Towels and wash cloth (your laundry is done for you so you may want 2 of each so you don’t go without waiting for yours to return)
- Underwear, socks, night wear (it can get pretty cool)
- Sneakers, perhaps hiking boots for home visits, and comfortable sandals
- Swimsuit
- Ear plugs (roosters and neighbors can be quite loud at night)
- Flashlight and batteries (preferably headlamp)
- Tampons, sanitary pads, razors
- Flip-flops to wear in the shower
- Toothbrush, toothpaste
- Brush/Comb (leave hair dryers at home – you often won’t have electricity, anyway)
- Sunglasses & hat
- Umbrella and/or pocket-size raincoat (expect some rain, guaranteed) Note: pack umbrella in your check in bag, they are not allowed in your carry-on
- Head Lamp (for clinics and to get around at night)
- Hand Sanitizer (for your daypack/fanny pack or your room)
- Clipboard & several pens for your assessments
- Battery operated fan for your room for comfortable sleeping (fans are in most rooms but only function when there is electricity running. Winter groups have fairly cool sleeping conditions, though.)
- Facial Wipes (bring plenty of them!)
- Solar Water Bag (if you require hot showers)
- Snacks (such as energy bars, crackers, dried fruits, candy, cans of tuna – though don’t forget a can opener and mayo packets)
- Two water bottles
- Personal reading books
- Your PRHDR T-shirt which you can purchase
- Light weight clothing, capri pants, scrub pants, tee shirts without logos
- A $10 bill for purchasing a tourist card (required upon arrival to the DR)
Light weight cotton clothes such as long shorts, light pants, capri pants, respectable shirts or tee shirts. A hat is nice as it protects form the sun. You should also bring a rain poncho for the frequent rains. You’ll need hand sanitizer for frequent use at the clinic, so you might want to buy it in a container that can be clipped on to your fanny pack.

What about when I’m off duty?

Modest shorts are OK, but it is often preferable for women to wear a skirt, a dress, or longer shorts. Men might want to bring a shirt with a collar for some occasions.

Should I pack any food?

Yes. You’ll want to pack snacks as shopping is very limited in Lajas, and our meals will include frequent beans and rice. Two suggestions: Pack all food in Ziploc bags unless you enjoy visits from bugs and rodents. Don’t pack anything with a lot of chocolate in it unless you enjoy melted chocolate. You might want to pack small cans/packages of tuna fish or potted meats, peanut butter and crackers, energy bars, cereal, candy, dried fruit or trail mix. Bring high-fiber cereals if you need this in your diet.

Is there anything else I should consider?

Yes. You can tell who’s been on this trip before: They’re the people who look clean, comfortable, and cool. What’s their secret? Any kind of pre-moistened wipe. You might want to use facial wipes a couple of times a day. You do not need to bring any bedding as that is provided. A battery-operated fan can provide a welcome breeze on a hot night. You might consider bringing an electric heating pot and instant coffee or tea (though coffee is generally available in the dining room by 7 a.m.). If you want a hot shower at the end of the day, consider bringing a solar shower bag. However, folks are generally very hot and sweaty at the end of the clinic and welcome lukewarm or even cool showers. Hot water is always in short supply.

How much luggage can I take?
You can take two pieces of luggage, one carry-on bag and one smaller personal bag. Your checked bags must weigh less than 50 pounds each. One of these bags will be a large duffel bag packed with medical supplies; this bag will be supplied by PRHDR. The other is your own personal luggage. You should pack two days' worth of clothing in your carry-on bag (in case your luggage is delayed or lost), as well as any supplies or medications you may need. It is common for luggage to be delayed. For the latest packing regulations, visit the Transportation Security Administration’s website at www.tsa.gov.

Medical Supplies

Where do the medical supplies come from?

You will be asked to request donations from local churches, pharmacies, doctors’ offices, and hospitals. You may also request cash donations from organizations and members of your community. Some members will receive more donations than they can carry, while others will not receive as many. At our workshops, we will organize the supplies so that everyone will have a fairly equal amount to take with them. Please do not accept any medications that will expire before you travel.

What medications are most needed?

Please check with Whitney Lutz for the latest information. We see about 2,000 patients on each trip. Generally speaking, large quantities are needed of these drugs:

- Antipyretics, analgesics: adult, infant, and child formulations of acetaminophen, ibuprofen, and aspirin
- Antacids: extra-strength generic is cheapest
- Vitamins: adult and children’s multivitamins with iron, prenatal vitamins
- Antimicrobials: amoxicillin, sulfonamides, broad-spectrum antibiotics, Bactrim DS, zithromax, pen VK, augmentin, keflex, biaxin, vantin, cipro, fluoroquinolones, ceftriaxone (rocheptin IM with lidocaine)
- Antifungal creams and orals: nizoral, nystatin, lotrimin, clotrimazole, tolfante
- Antihistamines: Benadryl, chlorpheniramine, Claritin, Zyrtec
- Antibacterial ointment: Bacitracin, triple antibiotic, bactroban (singles and tubes)
- Antiinflammatories: ibuprofen, buffered ASA, naproxen, daypro, and others
We also need basic antihypertensives (if available in a large enough amount), diabetes medications (in large supplies only), and ophthalmics (erythromycin, floxins, sulfa, steroid-combo and lubricating drops).

Miscellaneous supplies in need include non-latex gloves, 4-by-4 sponges, kerlix bandages, wound and ulcer care materials, cast shoes, and reading glasses.

For our emergency kits, we need scalpel blades, epinephrine and Benadryl ampoules with syringes, both adult and pediatric Epi-pens, 500 mL bags of appropriate IV solutions with IV needle starter kits, silver nitrate sticks and primary care and urgent care supplies.

We also need supplies to perform lab tests for strep, pregnancy, urine leukocytes, hemocult, as well as any fast tests. Glucometers are accepted if they have at least 25 strips and are a standard type. We urgently need large supplies of strips with matching meters.

**What to Review before the Trip**

**For Medical Volunteers:**
- Physical assessment skills, especially chest, skin, and children’s ears.
- Dermatology, especially fungal diseases, scabies, infections, and leg ulcer care.
- Medications commonly used (see the list above)
- Treatment of intestinal parasite infections (pinworms and ascaris)

**For Interpreters:**
- A good medical translation dictionary


*At Last, Fusimanal*
What happens when we arrive at the airport?

We fly into either Pureto Plata or Santiago and at arrival we have to purchase a tourist card for $10 which is valid for 30 days (make sure you pack a $10 bill). Next we get our luggage and go through customs. You will complete an application for entry into the country. When asked to list your reason for entering the country, mark “pleasure.”

Everyone helps to move all of the baggage, and you will be responsible for your own luggage. We will pack the luggage into trucks and drive in or private bus about an hour from the airport to Lajas, the village that is home to Fusimana.

What is Fusimana?

Fusimana is the name of the retreat center where we will stay. It is a Catholic mission retreat center for prayer. There dormitory style rooms with personal bathrooms, including flush toilets and showers. Be prepared for numerous little breakdowns. You should only use bottled water to brush your teeth. This water will be provided. Drinking water will also be provided. Do not put paper in the toilet. You’ll be given plastic bags for disposal.

What will we typically eat?

Breakfast: bread, ham and cheese, hot cereal, coffee, fruit, cold cereal with boxed milk, or eggs.

Lunch: peanut butter and jelly or cheese sandwiches.

Dinner: rice and beans, chicken soup, cabbage salad, fried chicken or stewed meat, fresh local fruits. Boiled milk is served for coffee at breakfast only.

What if I am vegetarian?

Many vegetarians have successfully completed the trip. However, it is important to be flexible. The beans may be prepared with some meat broth, but they do not have any chunks of meat. The food is served buffet-style so that you will be able to pick and choose. Vegans will not have any problem as few foods are prepared with dairy products.

Will I have a roommate?
Yes. At Fusimana the rooms are mostly doubles or triple occupants. If you have a roommate in mind, your request will be honored as much as possible. If you do not have a roommate, talk with trip leaders. They can help you connect with another participant.

**Are there bugs in the room?**

Yes, there can be roaches, spiders, and centipedes. There are usually no problems with them, except for phobias individuals may have. There are also plenty of mosquitoes. You will be supplied with mosquito netting for your bed. Be sure it is tucked in on all sides of the bed and that it does not have holes (if so, duct tape is handy for patching them). You can also spray your room, bed, and net before settling in, though some volunteers choose not to do this.

**What will I need to maintain personal hygiene?**

Bring enough materials for your menstrual period. The change in temperature, along with the stress of the trip, can change your normal cycle. Even if you have just completed your menses, still come prepared. Hand-wipes and a small paper bag work well when you need to change at the clinics. There are only outhouses at the village clinics.

**Can I take a shower?**

Yes. The water pressure is pretty good most of the time, although it occasionally becomes low. It is often cold, so you might want to bring a solar shower bag to heat your water on the lawn while you’re working in the clinic, though often at day’s end a cool, refreshing shower is preferred. Remember not to get a lot of shower water into your mouth or eyes.

**What will I do at the clinic?**

Remember: We are the clinic. We will convert a school or a church into a clinic for the day. Note that this can be a very confusing time, and it is best if individuals act under the direction of the coordinator.
If you are a nurse (or nursing student) or other health volunteer, you will take a patient’s history, perform a physical assessment, and then consult with a nurse practitioner or physician about the course of action. Remember to use universal precautions. You will instruct your patients about how to take the medication. Be sure to ask for allergies before giving any medication. Remember: You are not allowed to give out medication before consulting with the nurse practitioner or physician.

**What other responsibilities will I have?**

Each person is responsible for some supplies and medications. On the first day at Fusimana, you will be assigned to a specific table (GI, Pain, Cardiac, etc) with 2-3 people. You will be responsible to pack your supplies, inventory them, and organize them. Each day you will be sure that supplies are loaded onto the trucks. Each night you will reorganize your supplies and pack for the next clinic. This can be a time-consuming project, but it is important since most patients cannot afford to buy medications in pharmacies. They rely on us.

**What is a typical day like?**

We work long days. Remember, we are on Dominican time. No times are firm.

7 a.m. Breakfast in the dining room. Fill your water containers.

8 a.m. or earlier: Load supply bins into trucks and ride to clinic site over bad roads and across rivers. You are potentially at risk for accidents. There is no 911.

8:30 a.m. Arrive at the clinic site and set up to see patients.

9 a.m. to noon: See patients.

12 to 12:30 p.m.: Lunch break.

1:00 to 3:00 p.m. See patients, then break down clinic.
5 p.m. Return to Fusimana.

7 p.m. Dinner.

8 p.m. Daily group meeting followed by time to work on group projects, finish charting, and repack supply bins for the next day.

9 p.m. Usually we’re done for the day. This is a good time to sit in the gazebo and share your experiences with classmates and volunteers.

**What can I do in my free time?**

You can walk around Fusimana. There are lovely paths around the compound with places to sit and meditate. You can walk along the road and meet and talk with the local people at your leisure. You might enjoy walking to a nearby fruit stand to sample local produce. There is also a colmado, or small store, where you can buy soda and other refreshments. You will receive a code that will enable the use of internet on your device for a day or two so that you can occasionally check your email or contact home (keep in mind that Wi-Fi reception is spotty). It’s strongly suggested that you walk in pairs when leaving the compound, and ALWAYS walk single file when on foot. The roads are very windy and pedestrians do NOT have the right of way, EVER.

You’ll also have one free day for fun at the beautiful beach of Puerto Plata. You may choose to haggle with shopkeepers, enjoy lunch at a restaurant along the water, or simply enjoy a day by the pool. You can swim in the ocean there, but only in town. The surf is dangerous elsewhere.

The use of substances, marijuana, or drugs is illegal and forbidden. Smoking should be minimal and not near any building or home. Beer or wine is strictly limited to the hour before dinner. Hard liquor is prohibited. These policies must be followed for the good of the group and the community we come to serve.

**How much money will I need?**

You will need $10 to pay for a tourist visa at the airport. You’ll pay for your own meals in Puerto Plata, where lunch can range from $5 on the street to $20 at a nice restaurant on the beach. Typically, volunteers also like to buy gifts as well such as jewelry, homemade baskets, coffee, and vanilla, so plan accordingly. Sometimes a local jewelry maker or basket maker will come to Fusimana to display and sell their items, which are often more affordable than purchasing such items in Puerto Plata. We suggest at least $100. We do not recommend that you use ATM cards or credit cards except for back up as there have several scams against our members. Lucky people may tell you
otherwise, but beware. You can exchange money at the airport when we land, but if you are holding out for tourist shopping, you can often get a better exchange rate in Puerto Plata. Just bear in mind that the beach day is often not until the end of the trip, so again, plan accordingly.

**How is the weather?**

It is tropical and beautiful. In the winter, days are warm and sunny with temperatures ranging from the high seventies to mid nineties. In the summer, the temperature is in the eighties or nineties, but the evenings are cooler in the mountain area of Lajas. It can rain daily.

**Can I call home?**

Generally speaking, yes. Some cell phone services do work in the Lajas area. Be sure to contact your provider before you leave to activate whatever international calling plan the company might offer; doing so can save you significant money. There is also Internet service at the colmado next to the compound. These sell internet cards for reasonable rates; however, keep in mind that they are not necessarily reliable as Wi-Fi connection is spotty. There are also telecommunications stores at the beach that offer inexpensive service, and you can pay in pesos. You can also call from the airport when we arrive, though that’s a pretty hectic time. If you do, be sure to use the airport phone center, not the pay phones.

Keep in mind that you will also be given emergency numbers to share with family and friends should they need to reach you.

**Cultural Concerns**

**Do the Dominicans have pets?**

Most Dominicans cannot afford to have pampered pets. You'll see scrawny cats and dogs, sometimes roughly treated. Try not to be sentimental. Do not treat these animals like pets or try to feed or pet them. Work animals sometimes look thin and may be moved along roughly.
**Do people become homesick?**

Yes. It is common for people to have some degree of being homesick or to experience culture shock. It can strike at any time. You will deal with a different climate, culture, and food. The poverty may be difficult to confront. The type of care you give will be very different from what you are accustomed to, as you treat symptoms only, not the underlying causes, and of course lack technology. It is important to seek support when this happens from faculty and peers.

**What is reverse culture shock?**

It refers to a phenomenon that affects some students upon coming home. After immersion in such an intense and different experience, participants may have a difficult time readjusting to their life in the United States. It can be particularly helpful to seek out peers and colleagues to come to a new understanding of your experience. This experience will change you.

**What happens when we get home?**

We will have a post-trip reunion to share pictures and to process your experience. It is a great time to reconnect and share your experiences. Family is welcome

**Policies and Forms**

You will be informed of many policies and forms that must be completed. Please be sure to attend to these and consult trip leaders if you have questions or concerns. Maintain your personal vigilance at all times and do not follow the group or peers, or even leaders, if you question your own readiness or anyone’s safety.

Thank you for your time and energy in volunteering for this important international service. The clients we serve depend on our return twice a year and without you, we could not serve them!