

An Inadvertent Medical Voluntourist

Category: House Calls and Home Care

written by Joselyn Miller | February 9, 2026

When I was a young, idealistic premedical student, I inadvertently became a medical voluntourist—an often dismissive term for someone who combines vacationing with rendering short-term volunteer aid.

Picture a bright-eyed American student headed for a foreign country in the hope of contributing to saving lives. My group traveled through a jungle to get to a location that the director of this study-abroad opportunity had described as a remote village, with a patient who needed a house call. Pure excitement, angst, and joy bubbled from us throughout the trek—but nothing prepared us for what we would inadvertently do.

The harsh reality set in as soon as we arrived at our patient's small home, with a roof made of branches stuck into a cement-like structure and pots set about to collect rainwater. We were encouraged to all pile into this tiny dwelling, take out our phones, and document what we saw. My compadres started to do as we were told, even after we saw the frail condition the patient was in. It was a defining moment for me, because his condition was worse than our advance reading in our medical textbooks had described. We were given a brief lecture on his illness and encouraged to hand out candy to his children, and then we left. We did not evaluate him, give any treatment, improve his living conditions, or even offer any hope.

As we started the trek back, that was the moment I realized we were medical voluntourists. We had served no one but ourselves. I can only imagine what this patient and his family suffered as a result of our actions—or lack thereof. Our act of selfish gain was dangerous, and any premed, medical, or mission-oriented student should heed the possibility of causing more harm than good. If you think using medical voluntourism as a resume buffer is a good idea, please reconsider doing so if your heart is more interested in maintaining a facade of doing good.

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