

Hope for the globe

Rebecca Hope, a medical student at Leeds, is coordinator of Alma Mata, a global health network for healthcare graduates (www.almamata.net). She has a bachelors degree in international health from University College London and is author of *The Elective Pack*, available on studentbmj.com, a guide to international health and development for medical students. She spoke to **Tiago Villanueva** about the future for Alma Mata and global health

When did you first encounter global health?

Inequalities exist everywhere. I grew up in a small village in a region of England where the coal mines had gone, and steel works were bulldozed during the 1980s. At the state school up the road I soon realised that coming from a better-off commuter village made all the difference to my aspirations, education, and, ultimately, future course in life. This left an impression that will stay with me but also optimism that inequalities can be overcome when people have the opportunities to realise their potential. A brief project in rural India when I was 17 opened my eyes to the wider world and the global differences in health between and within countries and sparked a continuing passion for travel. My involvement in international health really began, though, with a bachelor of science degree (BSc) in international health at University College London.

What was it like to study for the bachelors degree?

Learning medicine means first learning vast quantities of facts. When I was applying for the BSc I felt like a large sponge absorbing as many facts as possible, and so I increasingly missed the chance to think for myself. The degree didn't disappoint me: I could get out of the medical section of the library and study topics such as political anthropology, human rights law, poverty and development theory, as well as maternal and child health. A three month project at Save the Children UK gave me an introduction to how humanitarian and aid agencies work, and experience in research. I'd like to pursue a masters or doctorate in the future, probably in health policy or financing. My interest is how primary health can be financed in low income settings and how people avoid impoverishment caused by medical expenses when they become ill.

How was Alma Mata set up and developed?

The BSc programmes in international health at Leeds and London were producing graduates who had spent a year immersing themselves in international health. The Medical Students International Network (Medsin) had been expanding in UK medical schools. It was inevitable that after graduation many medics were asking, "What next?" How can you keep your interests going after starting busy hospital jobs? There was a niche for a network that could help people stay connected with others with the same interests. This developed from an informal email group, suggested by Professor John Yudkin, who runs the BSc in London, to a web based resource that would give doctors and health professionals the tools they need to get involved in global health work, research, or training. Alma Mater is Latin for "nourishing mother," and is taken to mean an alumni's former institution of

learning. But the name is a pun because in 1978, at Alma Ata, in the former Soviet Union, world leaders met to work towards health for all.

What is your role in Alma Mata?

Alma Mata was intended to be an interactive and organic network. Members can post news, events, and links to the site and mailing list, and we aimed to be, rather than a "doing" organisation, a facilitator for other "doers." My role was to get the organisation and the website set up and start connecting with other organisations, such as Medsin, the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (IFMSA), Medact, and humanitarian aid agencies. A great team of other global enthusiasts joined me, and now I act as a coordinator, which mainly means sending lots of emails, writing for the site and newsletter, and going to conferences to meet interesting people to interview.

What can we expect from Alma Mata in the future?

A new focus for the team is to promote international health to undergraduates and postgraduates. If in the future the United Kingdom has a strong, well established global health career structure, with UK trained people contributing substantially on the international scene, we will have achieved our goals. With Alma Mata we are trying to mark out potential career paths for global health. The more feet walk the path, the clearer it becomes.

Where does global health fit with your career plans?

I am a great believer in chance rather than plans, and usually the best decisions I've made for my career have been on a whim. I'll see where that takes me for now, although in the future I'd like to do some practical work abroad and further study, hoping eventually to combine UK work, perhaps in general practice, with international health policy research.

What advice would you give readers interested in international health?

Get involved with Medsin or the IFMSA. Think about studying a BSc or setting up courses at your medical school. Go to lectures and conferences, you'll meet like minded people and make unexpected connections. Travel; see for yourself. Try to have an effective elective. After you graduate use Alma Mata to keep up to date and inspired throughout the clinical years. The best thing you can do is speak up: be active in challenging global health inequalities in whatever you do. Many opportunities exist for students and doctors to get involved, and hopefully the Alma Mata network will help open doors.

Is health more global now than ever?

An important determinant of health in our globalised world is the movement of money across borders rather than the movement of diseases. Globalisation is showing us how interconnected we are: it's like someone pulls a string in one country and 10 farmers in another fall over.

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Competing interests: None declared.

The Elective Pack is available at www.studentbmj.com/international/elective_pack.php.