Guidance for Overseas EMS

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The benefits of overseas EMS

Carrying out some of your Extra Mural Studies (EMS) abroad can be an extremely valuable and memorable experience. Spending time working with vets in another country will provide you with an insight into a different culture that you would be unlikely to get as a normal tourist. As well as broadening your horizons, you will gain a specific perspective on the role of the veterinary profession globally. In particular, overseas experience often gives students valuable insights into issues such as animal welfare, public health, global disease threats, environmental change and the role of the veterinary profession in international development.

Some overseas EMS placements can be very valuable ways of improving your practical and diagnostic skills. You may be able to have a more “hands on” role in some overseas placements than is possible in a UK veterinary practice. For instance, visiting a charity population control program may give you the opportunity to carry out large numbers of routine neutering operations.

Carrying out an overseas research project is another way of spending time overseas as an undergraduate. Field projects abroad will often give you a new perspective on research which you might previously have considered to be confined to laboratories in the UK. Often student’s research projects make a valuable scientific contribution in areas where funding is limited. You will also gain an understanding of the vital importance of research in improving animal and human health worldwide.

“I spent six months working on a voluntary project in Swaziland during my first year after qualifying as a vet. The experience taught me a great deal about a wide range of subjects: I learned about research (we published a paper about our work), I learned about working with teams (we liaised with paraveterinary staff on the ground) and I learned about the complexity of problems in developing countries. If I had gone straight into general practice instead of doing this work in Africa, I know that the six months would have zipped by and merged into a greyness with the rest of my veterinary career. I’d highly recommend any young graduate to seize this type of opportunity if it comes their way”

Pete Wedderburn, veterinary journalist and partner in a 4 vet small animal practice

Overseas experience is valued by employers, having such experience on your CV is likely to make you stand out from others in the increasingly competitive jobs market. Your EMS experience abroad is a very popular topic at job interviews, and is likely to be one that you will be able to enthuse upon.
Overseas experience is also very important if you have aspirations towards this field in your future career. You may be interested in working as a practising vet abroad, or perhaps as a vet involved in research or international development. Having spent time with overseas organisations as an undergraduate can be a very important first step on this career ladder.

“Overseas research and EMS is one of the best things I’ve ever done. Working in developing countries gave me a valuable insight into different cultures, and a new perspective on the vet’s role worldwide. It hugely increased my clinical competence and confidence, was fantastic fun and I made a lot of friends along the way. I now have the bug, and will never stop volunteering and working overseas”

Bev Panto, RVC Graduate

For all its virtues, organising overseas EMS can be a daunting task. The aim of this guide is to give you some ideas as to where you could go, guidance on what you need to consider when organising your placement, and to refer you to external sources of information that may help you further. This guide has focussed on EMS in developing countries, but much of the practical information is also applicable to EMS in developed countries.

We have done our best to ensure that the information is accurate and up to date, but it is up to you to verify information, and in particular to ensure that you check your plans thoroughly to ensure they comply with EMS regulations BEFORE you book.

If you have any suggestions for how this guide could be improved, or how we can help you further with overseas EMS please contact Jenny Maud.
Case Study: Alex Tasker

Alex Tasker graduated in 2006 and is currently studying for a PhD investigating aid for nomadic pastoralist communities. While Alex’s may be an extreme example, many graduates have commented on the positive effect overseas EMS has had on their veterinary career.

“When choosing my career, I applied to be a vet for many of the same reasons as my peers – I owned animals and had worked on farms and with horses for some years. This led to me focussing my work experience on local veterinary practices; I did the placements, applied for deferred entry, got it and left for Tanzania two months after getting my A-level results.

It was during my gap year that I first thought about the possibility of working overseas. It was not however until I came to arrange my pre-clinical EMS that I realised the possibilities available to a UK-qualified vet. I booked part of my first year EMS with an agricultural NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) working in Mozambique; in fact two of us from my year went out together. There were many reasons for doing it, not least the knowledge that there were plenty of opportunities to do the ‘conventional’ placements in the rest of the BVetMed course! Through my experience in Mozambique I realised that I enjoyed working in multi-disciplinary teams, and that vets had a very real ability to contribute to a range of fields outside the consulting room or farmyard.

I therefore designed my EMS to keep my options open throughout vet school. I was lucky to have a supportive tutor, and I knew I wanted to be able to do the job I was studying for – I needed to develop solid clinical skills after graduation. In addition to these skills, I also wanted to have the option of taking my degree overseas or into new fields of employment. I did further placements in Africa and was involved with the RVC Undergraduate Research Team to Guatemala. When it came to applying for jobs my overseas experience was remarked upon by all of my employers; in fact it landed me my first mixed-practice position. My boss believed that if you could cope with the responsibilities, decisions and problems of overseas work then you’d be solid enough when it came to a 4am colic or GDV!

Following four years in practice getting those ‘solid clinical skills’ I went back into overseas work. Most recently, I completed an MSc in Anthropology and Development studying ‘Humanitarian Aid among Nomadic Populations’ – the team working, logistical and research skills that originated from my EMS have proved invaluable. Development Organisations are increasingly recognising the worth of vets, but vets can benefit also. Since starting work in the field I have added economic, social science and humanitarian skills to my clinical abilities.

It was through EMS that I was first able to experience overseas fieldwork. Irrespective of the direction of my career in the future, I have no doubt that the skills I learnt whilst in the field have directly benefitted me in both the UK and abroad. EMS is a fantastic opportunity to move beyond the consulting room and see how the huge range of skills and abilities vets possess can be used in ways never usually considered by established clinicians. It is this perspective that EMS offers that I consider most valuable, and I urge all the vet students I tutor to experience it.

As for the future, I’ve been offered a PhD to continue working with Humanitarian Organisations and social scientists into nomadic aid; a number of overseas consultancies have also been in contact about work ranging from Mongolia to Oman. I believe a veterinary degree opens a lot of doors, but as practitioners we should never stop expanding our skills and experience – and EMS is the perfect place to start.
Some common principles that are likely to be shared by all of the veterinary schools are:

- The experience gained during an overseas EMS placement should be equivalent to that expected in the UK.
- You should be under the supervision of a veterinary surgeon.
- The supervising veterinary surgeon should speak English fluently, or you should be fluent in the language of the country where the EMS is to take place.

WHERE TO GO AND WHEN

There are a huge variety of EMS opportunities available to students in all corners of the world. Some examples of placements that students have carried out in the past include:

- First opinion and referral practices in developed countries. Some examples of placements include small animal practice in the US, equine experience at the Dubai Equine hospital or cattle practice in New Zealand.
- Research placements overseas.
- Exchanges with foreign veterinary schools.
- Charity placements in developing countries. Students have recently visited an equine hospital in Egypt, a charity neutering clinic in India, and Vetaid, a livestock charity in Kenya.

You may already have firm ideas where you would like to go, or you may have a very open mind as to where you might undertake overseas EMS. Finding an EMS placement overseas isn’t as easy as for UK placements and does require some research and perseverance on your part.
The following sources will be useful in giving you some inspiration and placement details:

Your vet school’s EMS database may have some overseas placements, and this is a good place to start looking. Bear in mind that overseas placements tend to vary in availability from year to year, so even if a placement is listed this doesn't guarantee that it is suitable. In addition, an EMS database is unlikely to be a comprehensive list of overseas opportunities, so you'll need to look elsewhere as well.

International Veterinary Students Association

The International Veterinary Students Association (IVSA) have an EMS database on their website. This currently (Summer 2012) isn’t working, however the IVSA officers are happy to be contacted directly (details on their website) and will supply details of EMS contacts in your chosen area. All IVSA placements are ones that other students have been on before, giving you some peace of mind that the placement is likely to be suitable and enjoyable.

British Veterinary Association Overseas Group

One of the BVA Overseas Group’s many useful resources is this list of overseas contacts. You will also find inspiration for overseas trips on the overseas experiences page.

Worldwide Veterinary Service

The Worldwide Veterinary Service sometimes has EMS placements available, including neutering based at their teaching clinic in India.

Veterinary student “adventure” holidays

Several travel companies have started to offer wildlife adventure tours that target veterinary students. Many offer an enjoyable and exciting experience, some suggest on their website that they may count towards EMS, and none are cheap. No matter the promises on the website, don’t assume that they would necessarily be counted towards your clinical EMS requirement.

When to go

Consider carefully when it will be most valuable to go on your chosen overseas EMS. If you intend to carry out EMS with a strong hands-on component, such as neutering clinics, it is best to leave these placements until the later stages of your EMS when you will have acquired some surgical experience. It is also valuable to have knowledge of what level of care, asepsis and anaesthesia is common in the UK to give you a basis for comparison. Conversely, if you are conducting EMS with a more observational bias, or research overseas, it is better to carry out these projects earlier, leaving you time to carry out project write ups and do hands on EMS at home.

Consider which time of year to do your placement, taking local advice. A farm animal placement during monsoon season may not be as much fun as you’d hoped!
As an alternative to clinical EMS abroad you may consider conducting a research project overseas. It may be possible to count time spent on field work overseas towards your EMS allocation; make sure to check how many weeks can be used in this way.

Many of the grants available for overseas EMS relate to research projects abroad. It is therefore well worth reading up carefully on these in case you can obtain additional funding for your project (see the Grants section of this guide). As an example, Christopher Snow gained funding from the RCVS Charitable Trust in 2011 for his project “Analysis of faecal cortisol levels and behavioural data from released Asian elephants from a rehabilitation centre in Sri Lanka”.

If carrying out an individual research project, you may be able to combine research with a clinical EMS placement overseas, for example investigating the prevalence of the *Babesia* parasite amongst a clinic population of working equines in Egypt. For inspiration as to what other students have studied, you can find reports from previous BVA grant holders [here](#), or RCVS trust grant holders [here](#).

If you have a particular project in mind, don’t be afraid to approach a supervisor with your proposal. You often won’t know what’s possible until you ask, and research staff may be able to “pull some strings” with their overseas contacts to help find you an overseas research project.
A major stumbling block to students seeking to pursue overseas EMS is funding. Overseas travel can be very expensive and you need to budget carefully for the total cost of EMS. In addition to the obvious costs of flights, food and accommodation, don’t forget additional items such as visas, medications, in-country travel expenses, and the cost of tourist activities you may want to do before or after your placement. Wherever possible try and obtain a student discount, particularly for flights.

Some placements may have a charge for student placements; for instance neutering charities may ask for a donation. Try to ensure that any donation you make genuinely supports the work of the charity, and that the experience you are offered is value for money. Be aware that some companies advertise veterinary student adventure holidays as EMS and these can be very costly.

There are various grants available to students to help fund EMS overseas. You need to start looking at funding opportunities at least a year in advance as most are only available on a yearly basis. Grants are competitive, but very well worth pursuing. Not only will they give you significant help towards the costs of EMS, they are also very prestigious, involve you in publications and presentations, and will look very good on your future CV.

The table below gives an outline of grants available, although it may not be a completely exhaustive list. Please check the details of each grant with the funding body.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grant</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Deadline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BVA Overseas Travel Grant</td>
<td>£500</td>
<td>Student in clinical years undertaking a research project in a developing country which contributes to sustainable development, including promotion of good animal welfare</td>
<td>February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BVA Transport Animal Welfare Studies Travel Scholarship Scheme</td>
<td>Up to £500</td>
<td>Projects involving working animals used for draught and pack purposes including transport and cultivation in developing countries</td>
<td>February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donkey Sanctuary Overseas Travel Grant</td>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>Travel and subsistence expenses for clinical students carrying out a project at a Donkey Sanctuary site in Mexico, Ethiopia, Egypt, Kenya or India.</td>
<td>February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry Steele-Bodger Memorial Travel Scholarship</td>
<td>£1000</td>
<td>Funding to assist a visit by an individual to a veterinary or agricultural school or research institute, or some other course of study approved by the governing committee. Open to 4th and final year students taking up the award in their final year.</td>
<td>April</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCVS Trust Vacation Research Scholarships</td>
<td>£500</td>
<td>To enable undergraduates to undertake a clinical research project during the vacation.</td>
<td>TBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEVA Trust Queen Mother Student Travel Awards</td>
<td>Up to £1000</td>
<td>Student must be a member of BEVA. Awards are made to allow students to travel in order to expand their studies relating to the science and welfare of the horse.</td>
<td>May and November</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zebra Foundation for Veterinary Zoological Education Grants</td>
<td>£100–£1000</td>
<td>To help students extend their knowledge of zoological medicine. This may be by attending relevant organisations at home or abroad, undertaking elective study projects or zoological research</td>
<td>Dec and June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MSD (Intervet) Connect Bursary</strong></td>
<td>£1000</td>
<td>Provides financial assistance to one undergraduate from each of the UK’s veterinary schools, enabling them to undertake research in new and exciting areas of veterinary work (either UK or overseas)</td>
<td>April/May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship</strong></td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>Award travelling fellowships to British citizens from all walks of life to travel overseas, to bring back knowledge and best practice for the benefit of others in their UK professions and communities. Must not be for directly academic activities, so you will need to read the documentation carefully to see if this grant can apply to your EMS.</td>
<td>October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW) Animal Welfare Student Scholarship</strong></td>
<td>£170 per week</td>
<td>Funding for student research projects related to animal welfare. Can be overseas as long as linked to a UK university.</td>
<td>February</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PASSPORTS, VISAS AND REGISTRATIONS**

**At least three months** before you travel check the passport and visa requirements for the country that you are visiting. The easiest way to do this is through the FCO website’s travel advice by country.

Some countries require that you have a minimum amount of time left on your passport before expiry, and others that you obtain a visa before you travel. Don’t forget the cost of visas when calculating the overall costs of your trip. It can take some time for a visa application to be processed, hence allowing 3 months before the start of your trip.

Before you go it’s a good idea to take several photocopies of your passport. In some countries you may be required to carry a copy of your passport while you are out and about.

If you are travelling as a student and not being paid you are unlikely to need a work permit, but do check this before you travel. Similarly, it is unlikely that as a student you will need to register with the veterinary council in your destination country (equivalent of the RCVS in the UK), however, it is worth double checking that this is the case. If you are travelling as a qualified vet you will need to arrange registration with the local veterinary council, and obtain a work permit if you are being paid while overseas. This can be a lengthy and sometimes expensive process.

**Figure 14: Approaching a remote border post in Northern Kenya**

**Figure 15: A student at a greyhound rescue charity in Spain - no visa required!**
**Travel vaccinations and medication**

You need to start planning travel vaccinations, **at least two months in advance** (If you need a hepatitis B vaccination you will need to start these 6 months in advance of your trip).

Which immunisations you require will vary according to your destination; you can find good advice on the [NHS travel website](#) or the [National Travel Health Network](#).

Most of the immunisations that you will need for foreign travel are not available on the NHS. You will need to obtain these privately either though your GP, or through a dedicated travel clinic. Make sure you account for the cost of immunisations when budgeting for your trip. Your university’s occupational health service may be able to help with cost of some immunisations.

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**Malaria**

You will also need to consider malaria chemoprophylaxis if travelling to an endemic area—again you will need to plan this well in advance as you need to start taking some medicines before you leave. Ask advice on which drugs will be suitable for you, and for the country you are visiting, from your GP or travel clinic.

In addition to taking prophylaxis you will need to consider measures to prevent yourself being bitten by mosquitoes. These include using a good insect repellent (such as one containing DEET) and covering up with long sleeves/ trousers at dawn and dusk. It is a good idea to take a good mosquito net that has been treated with insecticide with you on your trip; don’t rely on using mosquito nets provided in country, they usually have numerous large holes! Be aware of the signs of malaria, and seek prompt treatment if you develop a fever, even after you have returned. More information on malaria is available [here](#) and [here](#).

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*Figure 16: It isn't just the livestock that need injections!*

*Figure 17: Take your own mosquito net; often those provided are full of big holes!*
Zoonotic disease

The HSE information sheet "Common Zoonoses in Agriculture" give a good outline of zoonotic diseases that you need to be aware of while on EMS, both in the UK and abroad. Be aware that zoonotic diseases are likely to be more prevalent and less well controlled in many developing countries as compared to the UK. In addition, some zoonotic diseases which are rare or absent in the UK are prevalent in many developing countries. These include rabies, brucellosis and anthrax. Note that hygiene practices are sometimes not as rigorous as you might expect and that you therefore need to take responsibility for your own health while working overseas. In particular, don't feel pressured into doing something you feel is unsafe because others (including vets) are doing so. Make sure you take good protective clothing and effective disinfectant with you. You will need to be prepared to lead by example in some cases, and may have to develop a thick skin to comments criticising your perceived over-cautious approach.

Brucellosis and tuberculosis are common in many developing countries, and a common cause of zoonotic illness amongst farmers and vets. In affected countries it is important to ensure you do not drink unpasteurised milk and that you exercise good hygiene when handling livestock. Many vets who contracted brucellosis before it was eradicated from the UK will be able to tell you how unpleasant this disease is, and give you some motivation to avoid it!. Information from the World Health Organisation on brucellosis is available here.

Rabies

Rabies is a huge human and animal health problem in the developing world. Approximately 150 people die from rabies every day, the majority of them children. If you are visiting a country where rabies is endemic you may be actively involved in rabies vaccination programmes on your placement; it is therefore worthwhile reading about rabies and its control before you go. The BVA has good information here, or visit the Global Alliance for Rabies Control website.

You must be immunised against rabies if you are working with animals, or with products of animal origin (such as post mortem material) in any country where rabies is endemic. Rabies vaccination involves 3 vaccinations given on day 0, 7 and then 21 or 28. It is important to remember that pre-exposure vaccination DOES NOT mean that you do not need post exposure treatment, rather that fewer post exposure vaccinations are required. Rabies vaccination is also especially important if you will be working in a remote location and may not have access to medical attention quickly in the event of suspected rabies exposure.

If you are working in a country where rabies is endemic take extra care to avoid animal scratches.
and bites, or contact of open wounds with animal fluids such as saliva. If you are bitten you should wash the wound for 10 minutes in running water, and apply concentrated alcohol or povidone iodine scrub. You should seek medical attention immediately for post exposure vaccinations. If possible, the animal that has bitten you should be monitored/ tested for rabies.

More information on rabies prophylaxis is available [here](#), and guidance on what to do if bitten is available [here](#).

**General health advice while overseas**

Make sure that you have comprehensive health insurance to cover you should you become unwell or are injured while overseas. (See the [insurance](#) section of this guide).

Alongside getting the necessary immunisations, you should research additional health information for your destination- such as risks from diseases for which you can’t be vaccinated, or from swimming in freshwater or eating certain foods. Take sensible precautions like drinking bottled water and being cautious with street food. Take a good first aid kit with you, including anti-diarrhoea medication. If you are visiting a remote location your doctor may be able to prescribe antibiotics for you to take in the event of severe diarrhoea or other infections.

If you are visiting a developing country you need to take sensible precautions to protect yourself against HIV. These include taking with you sterile needles, syringes, gloves and dressings. Be aware of the potential for blood products to be contaminated.

Should you need to seek medical attention, ensure the medical facility you use is reputable- your hosts will likely be able to advise you, or you can find information in most good guidebooks. If you are hospitalised, or need advice, contact the British embassy who will be able to assist you. A list of contact details for embassies is available on the web [here](#), or you can phone the 24hr British Consular Assistance number on +44 20 7008 1500

**Links**

The following links give good general advice on healthcare while overseas:

- World Health Organisation
- FCO Travel Health
- 8 Weeks To Go
- NHS Fit For Travel
SAFETY AND SECURITY

Although your EMS experience is likely to be an extremely positive one, travel, particularly to developing countries, can pose some safety challenges. Your comparative wealth may mark you out as a target for unwelcome attention and if you are unlucky, crime. In addition, health and safety considerations are often lacking in developing countries and you will need to take a greater responsibility for your own safety than you would do at home.

General security advice when travelling in developing countries

Some common sense safety advice for overseas includes:

- Research the security situation in the country and area that you visit, finding out which areas are considered safe, and any particular precautions you should take. (see below)
- Always ensure that somebody knows where you are, or where you are going.
- Carry money and valuables in hidden secure areas. Avoid carrying large amounts of money or conspicuous valuables, and store money in several different places. Have a small amount of money readily available so that you don’t have to get all of your money out to pay for small items.
- Avoid dressing or behaving provocatively or in a way that may attract attention or mark you out as wealthy.
- In many countries avoid going out alone at night - again research the specific security situation.
- Avoid travelling in unlicensed taxis or private cars.
- Road travel can be dangerous due to poor roads, lack of safety laws, poorly maintained vehicles and dangerous driving techniques. Take care who you travel with and always try to wear a seatbelt.
- Take care in crowds or on public transport where pickpocketing can be a problem.

For security advice specific to veterinary placements, see this useful article on the BVA website.

Safety and security situation specific to the country that you visit

Before you book your placement it is important to research the security situation in the country that you visit. A very useful place to start is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, who have up to date and very comprehensive security advice on every country in the world, available here.
For advice on personal safety in a particular country or area, guidebooks such as the Lonely Planet or the Rough Guide contain a lot of good advice. There is also good country by country safety advice from World Nomads, a travel insurance company. If you have an iPhone, The Rough Guide have produced a Travel Survival Guide App, which you may find helpful. Call Uma is a translation by telephone service that may help get you out of a tricky situation - but beware this service is potentially costly.

A very important source of information on safety and security are the people that you meet on your placement. Don't be afraid to ask whether it is safe for you to travel to certain areas or whether there are any specific security precautions you should take. Ask for somebody to accompany you if you are worried it is unsafe for you to go somewhere alone.

Safety when working with animals

Figure 24: Cattle handling techniques may differ from those you are used to!

We are used to working in a country with stringent health and safety laws to keep us safe at work. These are often absent in developing countries and clinicians and lay people handling animals sometimes do so with less regard for safety than we have in the UK. You need to be aware of this and prepared to take control of your own safety, rather than taking for granted that your working conditions are safe, as you might do in the UK.

Figure 25: Equine field anaesthesia in Egypt; take care to avoid injury to you or your patient!

Animals however large or small are very dangerous. Pay close attention to the animal handling abilities of others around you, and don't carry out procedure if you have any doubts that an animal isn't adequately restrained. Animal bites or scratches in any country can be serious, but in a rabies endemic area these are life threatening (see the Health section). Large animal handling facilities in developing countries are often below the standards you are used to, and serious injuries easily occur when handling animals such as cattle. In the heat of the moment it is easy to feel pressured to take dangerous short cuts, or be led by others who are taking risks. Try and stay calm, and assert yourself calmly but confidently if you don't think something is safe.

Figure 26: A cattle race, Kenya style

Zoonotic diseases can be more of a threat abroad than in the UK - see the Health section for more details.
What to do if things go wrong

If something does go wrong, remember you are not alone, even if it feels like it at the time. People who can help include:

- Placement supervisors. Your colleagues and new friends on your placement are likely to be very supportive and can guide you to help available locally should you need it.
- Your friends and family at home.
- The EMS support team at your university.
- In the event of a serious incident contact the [Foreign and Commonwealth Office](https://www.gov.uk/government/world), they have a 24hr helpline on +44 20 7008 1500. Alternatively, you can contact the local British Embassy directly. It is a good idea to make a note of contact details for the embassy in case you need them in an emergency.

Keep in touch

It is very important to leave contact details with both your friends/family and with your vet school so that you can be contacted in an emergency. Make sure that you keep your contacts at home updated with your location and travel plans. Also make sure that supervisors at your placement have contact details for next of kin in the UK in case you are taken ill.

In addition, it is a good idea to register with the [Foreign Office’s Locate service](https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/locate), which will allow you to be contacted by the FCO in the event of an emergency.

**INSURANCE**

There are several types of insurance you need to consider when travelling overseas for EMS:

- Insurance against cancellation or missed flights and other travel bookings.
- Insurance of your possessions against theft or damage.
- Medical insurance to cover the cost of medical fees and repatriation should you become ill or suffer an accident overseas.
- Liability insurance against potential claims of liability relating to your veterinary activities. This includes professional liability insurance (for liability in regard to animals) and public liability insurance (for liability against people/possessions).

Your automatic student membership of the BVA includes insurance for EMS that applies overseas (during your placement only); details are available [here](https://www.bva.org.uk). This insurance does NOT replace the need for travel and medical insurance, which you will still need to obtain. Some universities have travel insurance policies that may be able to help in this regard, make sure you check thoroughly that you are definitely covered with your university if relying on this insurance.

In most cases it is likely that you will need to obtain your own travel insurance. Be aware that normal travel insurance policies will not cover for incidents arising out of occupational activities, and particularly working with animals or other hazardous activities. [Lloyd and Whyte Ltd](https://www.lloydwhyte.com) are an insurance company who work with the BVA and may be able to help with EMS insurance; they can be contacted on 0845 070 0115 or e-mail vets@lloydwhyte.com.

The BVA overseas group have useful information on insurance available [here](https://www.bva.org.uk).
ETHICS AND CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethics

If you are carrying out research you may need to seek ethical approval for your activities. Your project supervisor, and your university's ethics and welfare Committee will be able to guide you in this.

Alongside scientific ethics, it is important to consider the wider ethical impact of your placement. What will your impact be on the local community you will visit, on animal welfare or on the environment? Visiting a charitable organisation as a volunteer often has a very positive ethical impact, although things are sometimes not as clear cut as they first seem. For instance, maybe your activities in improving animal welfare have a negative environmental impact, or maybe the presence of volunteers removes jobs for local people? It is important to carefully consider these issues before and during your placement.

You may choose to travel as well as carry out EMS. You can find information on ethical tourism from the Ethical Traveller, a not for profit organisation and the charity Tourism Concern. SPANA have recently launched some information on ethical tourism in relation to animals.

You may find your own ethics challenged by the situations you encounter on your placement; visit the challenges chapter for further discussion of this.

Cultural considerations

Your EMS placement is a great opportunity to immerse yourself in another culture, and working as a vet in a new country allows you a far better opportunity to understand a different culture than you would get as a “normal tourist”. In order that you get the most out of your placement, and are able to best relate to those you encounter, it is important to read up on the culture and history of the country that you visit before you go. In addition, a little time spent researching veterinary issues of importance in your destination country will really mark you out as a good student when you first meet your placement supervisors.

Sources of such information include:

- Guidebooks such as the Lonely Planet and Rough Guide are often a good place to start, and often have a section which includes a “potted history” of a country and relevant cultural considerations.
- You can find some discussion relevant to veterinary activities in individual countries in this section of the BVA website.

You may find your own ethics challenged by the situations you encounter on your placement; visit the challenges chapter for further discussion of this.

Figure 28: Lumpy skin disease- it helps to read up on local veterinary issues before you arrive

- You may know of students who have visited your placement, or a similar one in the past. Such students are very happy to be contacted for advice and will give very valuable tips for your trip.
- The IVSA or even Wikivet and Novice may be good sources of in-country contacts who can fill you on what to expect before you arrive.
- The FAO, OIE and WVA websites, alongside a general internet search, should provide you with information such as any recent significant animal disease outbreaks, the location and work of nearby veterinary schools, types of farming and animal ownership, all which will be useful background information for your placement.

Some cultural considerations to pay particular attention to in your research include:
Dress code

Many developing countries, and particularly Islamic countries, have far more conservative dress codes than we are used to in the UK. Be aware that what we would consider normal clothing for a warm country may be seen as very risqué, or even offensive, by your new colleagues and clients. You will find it easier to gain respect of others if you dress appropriately. If in doubt, have a look at what those around you are wearing; if their arms/legs are covered, it is probably best for you to do the same. Despite perhaps not being the height of fashion, light loose long sleeved/legged clothes may actually keep you cooler than your favourite hot pants!

Attitudes to women

While we are very used to the majority of veterinary students being female, this is certainly not the case in many parts of the world. You may find that attitudes to women are very different to those you are used to and this can pose some problems for students. Sometimes western professional women will find themselves treated as “honorary men”, while at other times female students may struggle to be taken seriously. If you do encounter prejudice, remember to be considerate to a very different culture, and try to understand things from your host’s point of view. It is often better to have a thick skin and quietly prove yourself by your actions than to be confrontational.

Language and greetings

It is important to spend a little time learning a few basic phrases in the local language before you begin your placement. You will make many friends if you make the effort to greet local people properly, even if hello and thank you are the extent of your linguistic abilities.

You might also like to research what the appropriate greeting might be— for instance is it customary to shake hands, and if so, which hand? Similarly, find out which hand you are expected to eat with, in some countries using the wrong one will cause offence! Knowing local customs and gestures is very important; this interesting article will make you think about the small things that may offend.

Professional titles

We often refer to our colleagues quite informally, and you will be used to addressing vets in the UK by their first names. Pay attention to the etiquette for referring to professional colleagues in the country that you visit to ensure you don’t offend through overfamiliarity. In many countries it would be normal to refer to another vet as Dr Bloggs, rather than Fred. An added side effect of this is that you will likely often be referred to as Dr too—enjoy it!
Your overseas EMS experience, however valuable, is unlikely to be all plain sailing. Your attitudes and knowledge will be constantly challenged. Don’t be afraid of this— you are likely to look back on your placement as an extremely valuable learning experience, but this doesn’t mean that some aspects won’t be stressful or upsetting at the time.

Some challenges that you may encounter during overseas EMS are discussed below. It is a good idea to have a think about how you might cope with issues such as these. If possible, it can be very valuable to discuss challenges faced by previous students who have attended your placement with them before you go.

Animal welfare

Animal welfare standards in developing countries often fall below those that you are used to in the UK, and dealing with this reality can be difficult for students. It is important to remember that in countries where human food and healthcare is often scarce, animal welfare is by necessity of lower priority. These hardships over generations mean that animal welfare can assume a lower cultural importance. Lack of infrastructure often also means that there is little regulation of animal welfare, in contrast to strict rules in the EU.

It is important to view the animal welfare standards you encounter within the context of the human welfare around you, however this doesn’t mean you have to abandon your own principles. One of the benefits you can offer your host country is your knowledge of animal welfare and you shouldn’t be afraid to share it, as long as this is done in a practical and sensitive way. Many animal welfare improvements can offer significant human benefits, for example through improved livestock productivity. It is often best to address animal welfare in this context, rather than on purely “moral” grounds.

Some specific animal welfare or ethical issues students have encountered overseas and which you might like to consider your views on include;

- In many countries it is common for veterinary students to practise surgical operations on previously healthy animals.
- Euthanasia is often not carried out for religious reasons, for example in Islamic or Hindu traditions. Some very sick animals may be left suffering in order to die naturally, or animals may be subjected to salvage procedures, such as limb amputation in cattle with fractures.

Sean Wensley of the BVA has written a very useful guide to animal welfare in developing countries, available [here](https://example.com). You can find interesting articles on animal welfare in a global context on the World Veterinary Association [animal welfare section](https://example.com) and the FAO’s site on [farm animal welfare](https://example.com).

Poverty

When visiting a developing country it is common to be shocked or upset by the levels of poverty you encounter. This is a natural response, and again, a little research will help prepare you for what you are likely to encounter. It might be a good idea to focus some of your research on the role of the veterinary profession in addressing global poverty and then use your practical experiences to guide your views in this field.

You may feel uncomfortable if you are frequently a target for begging, or seen as a soft touch to sell goods to at inflated prices. You may have to become adept at ignoring salesmen, or politely declining their pitches. Find out from your local friends how much an item should cost before you buy; it may be
cheaper than you think! A particular example of this is likely to be upon immediate arrival at the airport, where you are may be hit by a barrage of offers for taxi rides, all at inflated prices. Try to pre-arrange somebody to collect you, or if this is not possible research your journey from the airport by public transport or find out how much a taxi should cost.

If you are in a country where it is customary to haggle, enjoy learning to do this. Ensure that haggling is friendly, but be aware that you may be being charged inflated “Westerner” prices. Vendors will often play the guilt card to persuade you to pay more than their product or service is worth and unless you stand your ground this will make your trip a lot more expensive than it needs to be. Remember they won’t settle on an amount that they are not making a profit on, so don’t be ripped off, never be rude, and have fun!

However tempted you may be to give to doubtless very deserving beggars it is often a better idea to give to a recognised charity supporting homeless people or street children. Giving to begging children can encourage their exploitation, trap children in a begging lifestyle and can lead to tourists being overwhelmed by beggars, not all of whom are deserving. Some thoughts on begging in developing countries are available on Wikitravel.

Difficulties with placement supervisors or expectations of competence

Some students encounter problems with what their placement supervisors expect them to do while on their placement. This can include not being allowed any “hands on” experience or conversely being thrown in at the deep end and asked to carry out procedures which they are not capable of. You may also experience prejudice from placement supervisors or other colleagues due to your gender or nationality.

Before you go on your placement it is important to try to establish what degree of practical competence is expected of you, and conversely to inform your placement supervisors of your level of experience. You may find it helpful to set this out in writing, in a letter or e-mail. Remember that foreign vets may not have a good knowledge of the UK veterinary curriculum. It is also important to try and gain advice from other students who have attended a placement previously to see if they encountered any such problems and how they dealt with them.

Figure 32: An Ethiopian street scene

Figure 33: Not all placement supervisors will be so friendly that they welcome you with champagne!

If, despite preparation, you find yourself faced by some of these problems there are several things you can do. Firstly: don’t take things personally-problems are likely related to a misunderstanding or cultural differences. It may be helpful to calmly talk to your supervisor and explain the problems you are experiencing. You will often be pleasantly surprised that your concerns will be easily addressed. If you are still concerned don’t forget that there is support available to you from the EMS support staff at your university. Like all of the steep learning curves you’ll experience on overseas EMS, learning to solve these problems, or to be resourceful when thrown in at the deep end, will be valuable experience for similar problems you might experience later in your career.
Isolation

It can be sometimes be isolating being in a totally new country, surrounded by unfamiliar people and carrying out often stressful work. Remember that in today’s internet age, you will never be too far from an internet café and a Skype® account will often let you stay in contact for free. A quick chat, or an e-mail with somebody at home can often relieve the most stressful situation.

Many students carrying out EMS abroad have kept a blog of their experiences; this is a great way of staying in touch with those at home, and also keeping a lasting record of your activities. You can visit Bev Panto’s blog of her time in Kenya here.

Isolation can often be a positive thing; you will likely develop strong friendships with those you’d otherwise never have met, and you will develop a self-reliance that will be useful in your future career.

Different veterinary practises or standards of care

Veterinary methods differ across the world. For example, you will be taught a midline procedure for a bitch spay but may encounter flank bitch spays in neutering projects abroad. The standards of veterinary care also commonly differ with some charity clinics very poorly resourced. You may find a lack of diagnostic facilities, such as x-ray or laboratory facilities, or a lack of drugs and supplies. You may also encounter vets with levels of training which differ from that available in the UK.

You are likely to learn a great deal about resourcefulness in the face of such challenges, and this adaptability will likely be of value in your future career. The lack of diagnostic facilities may seem daunting at first, but it will probably teach you some valuable lessons. You will be forced to place a lot of importance on your clinical examination skills, as this is likely to be the only diagnostic tool that you have. You will also have to add some extra diseases to your differential diagnoses list; diseases which are not seen in the UK are common in some countries such as foot and mouth disease or canine distemper.

Figure 34: You will need to be adaptable; here a student carries out a dog castration on a balcony

Figure 35: You may encounter unfamiliar diseases; this cow has foot and mouth disease

The exchange of knowledge and techniques between you and the vets you encounter is likely to be of value to both parties. Beware, however, that although you may think you know the best way of doing something, this is not always applicable to the situation in the country where you are working. In addition, be extremely careful and tactful before making any suggestions to one of your supervisors; you don’t want to offend them or be seen as a “know it all”!

It is also important to remember that you may well not be seeing best UK practice on your placement. Check any treatments or procedures against what you have been taught before writing about them in your exams!
WHAT TO TAKE WITH YOU

Some things to take with you- this list is by no means exhaustive!

**Camera**- remember to take photos of clinical cases as well as holiday snaps!

**Protective clothing**- for instance overalls if you are working with farm animals, or perhaps a consulting coat if working with small animals. Make sure these are sterilised before you return. Don’t bring back protective clothing you have worn around animals suffering from notifiable diseases such as foot and mouth disease. Make sure you observe any recommended quarantine periods before resuming working with farm animals at home.

**Stethoscope** and any other diagnostic equipment

**Textbooks**- You may like to take some textbooks with you for reference. It may also be appropriate to take donations of veterinary textbooks- see the BVA Overseas Group book aid scheme.

**Presents for supervisors**- You will probably be lucky enough to be treated to very generous hospitality by your hosts. Consider taking some small gifts or souvenirs from the UK to give in return. It’s also a nice idea to take some photos of your friends and family at home, and perhaps some of typical UK veterinary facilities; these make very good ice-breakers.

**Veterinary supplies.** Some charities may ask for a donation of veterinary supplies. The BVA has a useful factsheet about exporting veterinary drugs and supplies [here](#). In particular, it isn’t a good idea to take out of date drugs from the UK, however tempting this may be. It is more sustainable to source supplies in country wherever possible.

**Documents**- Alongside your passport you should also take photocopies of your passport and visa, you’re your insurance documents and travel vaccination records. Also take the emergency contact details with you.

**EMS forms**- Make sure you bring any feedback forms back with you; don’t rely on international post!

**Money**- In most countries you can take out cash from ATM’s. Check that this is the case in the country where you are going, and notify your bank that you are going abroad so that they don’t block your card. You may want to take some US dollars as a back up.

**Diary**- Keep a record of all your experiences. This will be invaluable when you come to do any presentations or publications related to your EMS.

**First aid kit.** Don’t forget your anti-malarials if required, and if you are going to a very remote area you may like to ask your doctor whether they think it is suitable to prescribe some antibiotics for you. See the health section for further details.

And finally- don’t forget the **sunscreen**!
OVERSEAS EMS CHECKLIST

At least 1 year before trip

- **Initial Research**
  - What sort of EMS, where and when?

Further Research

- Contact chosen placement(s)
- Contact students who have attended placement previously
- Research health and safety considerations
- Ensure placement meets EMS regulations

Funding

- Research and apply for funding opportunities.

Check plans comply with regulations before booking anything

3-6 months before trip

- **Book Flights**
  - Check for student discounts

Insurance

- Discuss insurance with university if in any doubt

Passport and Visas

3 months before trip

- **Travel healthcare**
  - Obtain travel vaccinations and anti-malarials etc.

Further Research

- Culture and history of country
- Health and safety
- Veterinary issues of importance
- Travel practicalities, challenges you are likely to encounter

Go on your overseas EMS

- Have a great time!
- Keep in touch- university, friends/family and FCO locate service.
- Make sure you have emergency contact details handy

Tell everyone about it when you get home

- Presentations, publications and the BVA website

Chapter 1, 2, 3, 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 9

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapters 7, 8, 10 and 11

Chapter 13
WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU RETURN

We hope that you will return filled with enthusiasm for your overseas experiences. We would ask you to consider sharing these as widely as possible to encourage others to follow in your footsteps.

You can publicise your experiences to other students at your university by writing reports to be published in newsletters or online. You may be able to give a talk at EMS events, as part of professional studies strands or to extra curricular groups such as the IVSA.

You can also publicise your trip to vet students nationally. The BVA Overseas group are keen to receive reports of overseas experiences, see examples here. Some students have even written reports of their overseas EMS in publications such as the Veterinary Times- see Bev Panto’s report here.

If you have conducted a research project abroad, seek ways to publish your findings, perhaps as part of a scientific paper, or by presenting your work at relevant conferences. If you received funding for your overseas work, you may be required to produce a formal report to present your findings to the funding body.

LINKS

The following links may be useful in researching your overseas EMS placement (all have been mentioned elsewhere in this guide).

RVC Global Initiatives
Bev Panto’s EMS Blog
Bev Panto’s Borneo and Thailand Blog
BVA Overseas Group
BVA Overseas EMS grants
World Health Organisation
Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO)
The World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE)

World Veterinary Association
Commonwealth Veterinary Association
International Veterinary Students Association (IVSA)
IVSA UK
Wikivet
NHS travel website
National Travel Health Network
Global Alliance for Rabies Control
Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)
FCO Contact Details for Embassies
FCO Locate service

Figure 36: You might consider writing an article for publication, such as this one by Bev Panto.

Presentations or publications are a valuable experience for you, and a great way to encourage others to undertake overseas EMS. Such publications and presentations will also be a starring feature of your CV.
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You can read more about the Student as Global Citizens project, and global initiatives at the RVC here.

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