



Pre-Dentistry Internship Program

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Introduction

Spending several weeks in Mombasa, Kenya, interning through International Medical Aid, was one of the most eye-opening experiences of my life. As an undergraduate student who plans to attend dental school, I knew I wanted more than just classroom knowledge—I wanted to see what healthcare looked like in different parts of the world, especially in places where people don't always have easy access to care. I hoped the internship would give me a better understanding of dentistry, but what I didn't expect was how much it would impact the way I see people, healthcare, and my own future.

Working at Coast General Teaching and Referral Hospital

I was placed in the dental unit at Coast General Teaching and Referral Hospital, one of the largest public hospitals in the coastal region of Kenya. From the first day, I was amazed by how busy the clinic was and how many patients showed up needing care. Many people had waited a long time to be seen, often because they couldn't afford to go to private clinics or because there just weren't enough dentists in the region.

In the oral surgery department, I observed many extractions and abscess drainages. These procedures were often performed under difficult conditions—limited tools, time constraints, and a high volume of patients. Most of the people we saw were in serious pain and had waited until their symptoms were unbearable. We also saw patients with jaw fractures, tumors, and cysts—cases that would typically be addressed much earlier in more developed countries. But here, patients often came in only when the pain was no longer tolerable or when the condition was visibly affecting their daily life.

Beyond oral surgery, I spent time in other areas of the dental unit, including general dentistry, pediatric care, and cosmetic procedures. In the cosmetic area, I built close friendships with several dental technicians who took the time to show me how they crafted and molded patient impressions. Watching them create these molds by hand and with such attention to detail helped me see the artistic and technical sides of dentistry coming together. This really showed how much of dentistry is hands-on craftsmanship—and how rewarding that part of the field can be.

Seeing Gratitude in Real Time

One thing I noticed early on—and something I will never forget—was how deeply grateful patients were, even for what seemed like basic procedures. In many cases, the dental treatment they received

was the first real care they'd had in years, or even in their life. Many patients left the clinic smiling, even after a tough extraction or painful procedure, simply because their pain had been eased.

One patient in particular stands out in my memory: a woman who came in with a serious dental abscess. She had been living with swelling and pain for weeks, but delayed care because she couldn't afford the treatment or take time off from work. When the team finally drained the abscess and relieved her pain, she was overwhelmed with emotion. She held my hand, looked me in the eyes, and thanked the entire team for helping her. That interaction taught me more about the human side of healthcare than any textbook ever could. It reminded me why empathy is so important—not just in medicine, but in life.

These moments of connection were everywhere. Whether I was helping a child feel calm before a check-up or observing a young man's reaction after getting his teeth cleaned for the first time in years, I felt more and more certain that I was on the right path. Dentistry isn't just about treating teeth—it's about restoring confidence, easing pain, and helping people live their lives more fully.

Learning About Health Disparities

Before going to Kenya, I had read about healthcare disparities and access issues in developing countries, but it's one thing to read about them—and another to witness them firsthand. I quickly saw how the lack of resources, infrastructure, and funding affected both patients and healthcare workers. Coast General is a teaching and referral hospital, and yet they often didn't have enough basic dental supplies. There were days when the team had to get creative or work with what they had to treat patients.

I also noticed that many conditions we saw could have been prevented with earlier treatment or better education. Dental hygiene tools like toothbrushes, floss, or even clean water were not always available to patients. Preventive care—something I'd always taken for granted—wasn't common in many parts of the community. People simply didn't have access to the resources or information to maintain good oral health, and that led to more serious and costly issues down the line.

According to an IMA lecture on healthcare systems in low-resource settings, one of the biggest challenges is the "delayed care model," where people only seek treatment when their condition becomes critical (IMA, 2023). I saw this everywhere. Patients weren't neglectful—they were doing their best with what little they had. It made me realize how important community-based health education is and how much of an impact even basic awareness can have.

Cultural Understanding and Growth

Living and working in Mombasa gave me the chance to engage with a culture very different from my own. From the local food and music to the traditions and social customs, I learned so much simply by listening, observing, and asking questions. I was especially touched by how welcoming the staff and patients were. Even in moments when I felt out of place or unsure, people took time to teach me and include me.

The dental techs I became close with didn't just show me how they worked—they welcomed me like a younger sibling. We talked about our different upbringings, laughed over the differences in slang and language, and even arm wrestled. I learned a few phrases in Swahili, and they teased me gently when I got the pronunciation wrong. It was through these moments of cultural exchange that I really began to appreciate the power of kindness, curiosity, and humility in building trust—not just with coworkers, but also with patients.

Thinking About the Bigger Picture

Working in this environment made me think a lot about my future and how I want to practice dentistry. I realized that I don't want to just be a dentist who works in a comfortable clinic and treats patients who can afford care. I want to be someone who actively finds ways to give back—whether that means volunteering my time, helping underserved communities in my own country, or returning to places like Mombasa to provide care.

I also became more aware of how public policy, infrastructure, and government systems shape access to healthcare. Kenya's national healthcare system has made some improvements in expanding coverage, but underfunding, political instability, and uneven distribution of services continue to pose challenges (World Health Organization, 2021). It made me realize that being a healthcare provider isn't just about the clinic—it's also about advocating for systems that support equity and access.

The IMA global health curriculum touched on this as well. One lecture noted that "healthcare providers must understand the sociopolitical structures that influence patient care, particularly in low-income settings" (IMA, 2023). That point stuck with me because it reminded me that medicine doesn't exist in a vacuum. As a future dentist, I want to use my voice not just for individual patients, but also for systems that can improve lives on a larger scale.

What This Means for My Future

Looking back, I feel incredibly lucky to have had this experience. It pushed me out of my comfort zone, helped me grow both personally and professionally, and confirmed that dentistry is the right path for me. But more than that, it showed me the kind of provider I want to be—empathetic, hands-on, and committed to serving those who are often overlooked.

I want to use what I've learned to not only help people with their dental needs but also to advocate for better access, more education, and more compassion in healthcare. Whether I'm treating a child in a high-tech clinic or helping someone in a mobile dental unit, I'll carry the lessons from Mombasa with me. I'll remember the people, the stories, and the moments of gratitude that made every day in that dental unit meaningful.

In the future, I hope to work with organizations that serve low-income communities, both at home and abroad. I'd love to participate in dental missions and work in community health centers to provide care and education to those who need it most. My goal is to take the privilege of my education and pay it forward—to use my skills to improve lives, one patient at a time.

Conclusion

My internship with International Medical Aid didn't just teach me about dental procedures or hospital systems. It taught me about people. It taught me that behind every tooth is a story, a struggle, and a human being who deserves care and dignity. It showed me that healthcare is about more than tools and techniques—it's about listening, learning, and doing the best you can with what you have.

This experience will stay with me for the rest of my life. It has shaped not only how I see the world, but also how I see myself. I'm more motivated than ever to become a dentist, not just for the sake of practicing a profession, but to make a real difference in people's lives.

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