



Pre-Medicine Internship Program

Addie Weishaar

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

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Jambo, Pole Pole, Rafiki: Three Lessons from Kenya That Will Shape My Future in Medicine

From my two weeks in Mombasa, Kenya, I vividly remember three words from the Swahili Language: "jambo", "pole pole", and "rafiki". Even if they are few in number, the sentiment behind these words is a true testament to the hospitality, serenity, and amiability of this country and the people who inhabit it. My time with International Medical Aid has been an experience that has taught me amounts of medical knowledge beyond measure, but it is these three specific attributes that I will carry with me through my future medical journey and beyond.

"Jambo", meaning "hello", perfectly encapsulates the welcoming nature of the people I met in Kenya. At the IMA residence, the staff's openness was remarkable. I was greeted by a team of individuals who were eager to provide me with abundant opportunities to explore Kenya, even beyond the medical scene. My favorite trek included visiting the spice markets, Fort Jesus, and, most notably, the Pembe Za Ndovu. "One has not truly been in Mombasa without seeing the giant tusks," our guide said. Known by many as the Mombasa Tusks, this attraction site historically commemorates Queen Elizabeth's visit during the time of British colonization and was later refurbished before Princess Margaret's visit in 1956 (Gacherl, 2022). This large structure symbolizes the culture's hospitality as it welcomes thousands of individuals a year, from royalty to travelers like myself.

Similarly, the Coast General Teaching and Referral Hospital staff welcomed me with open arms. The medical professionals enthusiastically participated in discussions regarding typical cases and their management, the influence of local culture on medical procedures, and their creative use of resources to assist patients. Several Medical Officers, in particular, were especially skilled at informing interns about specific cases, explaining them in precise but easily understood detail. For instance, Dr. Sarat extensively explained meningitis, a condition where the meninges become infected, causing fever, a stiff neck, and potentially seizures or death. While this disease annually affects around 3,000 individuals in the United States, it ranks among the top five pediatric cases at Coast General Teaching and Referral Hospital (Boston Children's Hospital). Cerebrospinal fluid retrieved from lumbar puncture procedures is commonly used to diagnose meningitis. I had the opportunity to witness two lumbar punctures during my pediatric rotation in addition to a variety of other minimally invasive, palliative, and diagnostic procedures. The willingness of the busy staff to share their knowledge and genuine interest in my learning made my experience invaluable. Mombasa's medical community, much like its general population, has characteristics of generosity and openness, making it a truly welcoming place for anyone fortunate enough to visit.

"Pole Pole", meaning "slowly" or "little by little", captures the laid-back and contented attitude prevalent in many aspects of Kenyan life. This philosophy promotes slowing down to appreciate the here and now and life's journey, as opposed to rushing toward the future. Based on my experiences, the most significant difference between American and Kenyan communities is the level of urgency and perception of time. In the United States, a fast-paced, career-driven lifestyle is the norm. Although Kenyans place a high value on their work, they also tend to live considerably slower and more deliberately. The emphasis on connections and experiences over strict adherence to time is evident in the fact that it is culturally acceptable to arrive thirty minutes later than planned (Healthcare Internship Orientation: Cross-Cultural Considerations). They are efficient, yet they savor and appreciate the journey that leads to their final destination.

During the hospital orientation, Dr. Shazim stated that each ward floor has a patient capacity of 75, yet there is usually only one Medical Officer on each floor. This information shocked our entire group, as such a disproportionate ratio is relatively uncommon in the United States. I anticipated my first day shadowing in these wards to be chaotic, with little opportunity to build rapport with and inquire information from the Medical Officers. To my surprise, this was not the case. Despite being severely outnumbered, the Medical Officers took their time assessing and explaining each patient and their treatment plan, often engaging in lighthearted interactions with both patients and fellow staff members. The surgery department shared a similar sense of serenity. During my night rotation in this department, there were multiple gunshot casualties, creating a serious, urgent atmosphere. However, amidst all the x-rays and sutures, the anesthesiologist was singing along to "Tennessee Whiskey" by Chris Stapleton. The ability of the medical staff to stay composed through daily tasks and challenges highlights the common sense of calmness and relaxation towards life shared by Medical Officers, other medical staff, and Kenyan citizens in general.

"Rafiki", meaning "friend", indicates the importance of friendship and teamwork that I observed through my experience. Aligning with their welcoming charisma, the African people are thoughtful, supporting the community and individuals alike. During my second week at this internship, I got to visit the Tumaini Children's Home. From the moment we walked through the gate, the children asked us to talk, laugh, dance, and play. Their eagerness to befriend every one of the interns models that, even in this culture's youth, they are committed to serving and supporting everyone. This sense of friendship and care extends far beyond the youth of Kenya, as exemplified in their Vision 2030 political agenda. In 2008, the president at the time, Mwai Kibaki, initiated a campaign that planned to create a more industrialized society by 2030. One of the three pillars of this plan was to increase the social prosperity of the Kenyan people. From recruiting more teachers and building more educational centers to supplying additional tuition funding to lower-income families, this pillar strives to facilitate educational opportunities for citizens to become more involved in society through jobs, vocation, and recreation

(Kenya Vision 2030). The Kenya government replicates its cultural values of promoting the well-being and happiness of others by continuously focusing on providing opportunities for growth and support to all of its citizens.

In the hospital, the camaraderie among the staff was palpable. Whether professional or personal, the medical staff at Coast General were always communicating with each other. During a thoracic gunshot wound procedure, I witnessed their remarkable teamwork firsthand. Nearly 15 medical professionals were coming in and out of the operating room, retrieving supplies, providing the newest MRI scans, offering their expertise, etc. The bullet ended up being more difficult to retrieve than expected, and they were unsure if they would actually be able to do so without causing too much trauma. I specifically remember a group of Medical Officers huddled together going back and forward discussing this matter. They ultimately came to the general consensus that they would send the stable patient to the ICU, allowing a more specialized professional to assess the patient and provide his medical advice. Much like healthcare within the United States, it is essential that the medical staff discover and communicate patient care plans with one another. The staff at Coast General surpassed my expectations of what communication in the hospital setting should be, as they effectively communicated through difficult cases and maintained a positive, friendly relationship.

My time in this internship exposed me to an abundance of medical diagnoses and procedures, some of which I had never even heard of. I enjoyed the ability to feel so involved in each case, affirming my ambition to go into this field, particularly in the high-pressure environment of the operating room. While I gained significant medical knowledge and techniques, the most valuable lessons I learned were those that medical school might not necessarily teach, such as the concepts of "jambo", "pole pole", and "rafiki". Experiencing the warm and welcoming nature of the Kenyan culture has made me realize how essential this trait is in the healthcare setting. Having these welcoming characteristics helps foster trust, comfort, and honest communication between the medical staff and patients. In the role of a healthcare professional, I have found the importance of replicating the Kenyan's relationship with time. Moving forward, I understand the necessity of slowing down and invoking professional and personal life balance. Doing so ensures that I can provide a calm and supportive environment for patients. Along with this, having supportive friendships and collaborative teams is an important aspect of my career and life in general. Being able to effectively communicate with staff members is important, but obtaining supportive relationships is equally as important in this high-stress career. This experience has prepared me to embrace these three values as I pursue my future in healthcare.

After completing this internship, I am extremely grateful for the chance to travel to Mombasa, Kenya, for two weeks and be a part of the International Medical Aid program. In addition to explaining my knowledge of medicine, this experience has taught me priceless life lessons. The warmth of the Kenyan

people, their emphasis on cooperation, and their balanced outlook on life have taught me the value of building trust, upholding individual well-being, and working well with others. I am applying these traits in medical school and future career endeavors to continue to provide kind, patient-centered care.

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EMAIL

admissions@medicalaid.org

ADDRESS

1629 K Street NW Suite 300

Washington, DC 20006