



Pre-Medicine Internship Program

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What It Truly Means to Be a Doctor: My Internship Experience at Coast General Teaching and Referral Hospital

It's beautiful how overwhelmingly diverse a simple piece of paper can be. It can be manipulated into a plane to soar the limitless skies, a boat to sail the high seas, or even an intricate crane to simply admire. These meaningless objects have the power to change someone's perspective on their day or even their life. I experienced this revelation during my internship at Coast General Teaching and Referral Hospital while folding a dull, little crane.

During my first day of rotation in the pediatrics in-patient ward, my heart completely broke in two from what I saw: countless kids, from toddler to teen, hanging on to life by a mere thread with their mom anxiously lying by their side. Each bed was separated by a few inches, completely missing curtains or sheets as a form of privacy from patients and interns around them. Although fully cared for by nurses and doctors alike, the number of patients completely outnumbered the support available. As I witnessed these conditions, I saw a beautiful 14 year old girl lying on her broken cot, motionless, completely lost to this world. Her mom did everything she could to provide joy in such a dismal situation. But, nothing could bring happiness to her solemn face. As I watched this interaction, my hands began to fold a piece of paper ripped out of my International Medical Aid journal. With each fold, a simple crane came to life. Although missing any sense of glamour or appeal, I gave it to the little girl, witnessing a shimmering spark in her eyes. With a quiet "asante", I saw her mom begin to use the crane to play with her daughter, moving the little creature around the cot. My heart leaped after seeing the girl examine the piece of paper in her fragile hands, finally witnessing a smile come across her lips. It wasn't until that moment did I realize how impactful a simple piece of paper can be.

I have never been someone who was great with kids. As a shock to my female friends, you could never catch me babysitting or experiencing any form of baby fever. However, I will never look at kids the same way after this unforgettable experience, thanks to International Medical Aid. Throughout my time participating in this internship, I have gained a deeper understanding of the importance of proper patient care, despite dire circumstances. From witnessing the first moments of life for a newborn baby to watching a 2-week old take its final breath, this experience has pushed me emotionally and mentally, testing my perceived limits in the medical field. In every department, I have witnessed a sense of adaptability and resourcefulness, encapsulating the beautiful phrase "Huduma bora ni haki yako" seen on the walls of the hospital, meaning good service is your right. I pray that I will live by this motto and the examples of those in this hospital the rest of my life.

Throughout my experience with International Medical Aid (IMA), I have gained countless skills, specifically those of adaptability, compassion, and curiosity.

From the moment I arrived in Mombasa, I fell in love with the people and the unique culture surrounding me. Although I experienced a little culture shock at first, I learned the important lesson of adapting and learning from those around me, which I have personally experienced my whole life as a military kid. Within each interaction in Mombasa, I have felt so appreciated and supported, experiencing second hand excitement when they shared their cultural practices and history with me! Especially from the mentors and workers in IMA, I felt like a member of a rambunctious and beautiful family, everyone taking the time to answer my dumb or culturally naive questions.

Nonetheless, I primarily learned the importance of adaptability during my time within the hospital. We as students are given the incredible opportunity of witnessing the medical system in Mombasa at Coast General Teaching and Referral Hospital (CGTRH), learning about the cultural and political factors that influence their delivery of patient care. When I first arrived at CGTRH, which is the second largest hospital in Kenya (Coast General Teaching & Referral Hospital, 2023), I was blown away; its massive structure representing a brain, connecting wards and passageways throughout the hospital like "neural" networks. Although I had done minimal research on the healthcare system in Mombasa before arriving, the complexity and organization of this hospital bypassed any perception I previously conjured.

That being said, the hospital faces daily challenges in providing needed care in every department based on shortages of supplies, medical equipment, doctors, nurses, funding, etc. Based on the public health sector of Mombasa having a doctor to patient ratio of 12:100,000 between 2005-2010 (Okoth, OD. & Samuel W., 2023), CGTRH members are pushed past their limits, working up to 24-hour shifts. Due to the Kenyan government only allocating less than 15% of the national budget towards healthcare (Africa Practice, 2024), Kenya heavily relies on international funding for healthcare delivery, and is unfortunately suffering from the loss or freeze of USAID funding in the past few months. During many discussions I had with Doctors and nurses at CGTRH, many believed that the change in insurance programs from the National Hospital Insurance Fund (NHIF) to Social Health Authority (SHA) left the majority of patients unable to afford medical bills or receive proper treatment due it failing to cover a majority of out-patient expenditures at a price of at least 300 shillings a month (Digitali Webbs Services, 2024). These political factors have left many departments without the needed materials or manpower to provide care to patients at their desired level. For example, during my time in radiology, numerous patients coming in for a Computed Tomography (CT) scan had to be turned down based on a shortage of contrast or the scan itself malfunctioning, forcing patients to rely on private hospitals. Even while shadowing in the Accident and Emergency Department, countless issues were faced in patient

support due to a lack of beds, materials, availability of ventilators, etc. All of these factors have directly and indirectly influenced patient care and availability towards those who are truly in need.

Despite the hospital facing these political challenges, I have never met more resourceful and dedicated doctors than I have at this hospital. Because of IMA, my perception of CGTRH and patient practice has completely changed, taking into account the endless amount of patients served daily and the taxing expectations required from healthcare providers at this hospital.

As seen during my fifth week in the Comprehensive Care Clinic (CCC), which specializes in HIV diagnosis and treatment, I learned about the impending reality of losing financial support from the U.S. Specifically regarding materials, syringe imports from the United States, a crucial factor in diagnosing HIV/AIDS, were dwindling. Rather than worrying about this fact, many doctors in the CCC used their skills to improvise diagnostic practices using damaged or unrelated equipment to properly care for their patients. I was in awe of their adaptability. Even while rotating in the Surgery Department, I experienced one of the most jaw dropping procedures: fixing tendons on a completely damaged hand due to electrical burns. When I first walked into the Main Theatre 3, I examined the utter annihilation of the patient's hands, bones completely exposed to the outside world. Although he had lost full control of his right hand, Dr. Ruth was determined to give this man control of his left hand again. Due to an incredible four hour procedure consisting of altering plans, catheters were used as temporary connectors for his tendons! Their willingness to think outside the box gave the patient a chance to use his left hand again. This form of adaptability has been implemented in every single department I shadowed in, from Pediatrics to Accident and Emergency. All nurses and doctors at CGTRH use these stressful conditions to prioritize patients, sacrificing their time and energy to save lives. I will use these examples to avoid relying on my perfectionist nature in medical care and adapt to a patient's needs, showing compassion in stressful circumstances.

Compassion is monumental in regard to providing care in the medical field. Sometimes, the little moments of kindness and thoughtfulness are all a patient needs in order to help them get through their circumstance. This internship has pushed me outside of my comfort zone, learning to prioritize those around me before myself and ignoring personal doubts that can influence my ability to connect with patients.

As someone who struggles with social anxiety, meeting new people in a foreign country filled with language barriers was utterly terrifying. Especially after realizing I would be meeting new people every week for six weeks during this internship, in both the hospital and the residence, my mind was spinning. However, this program has helped me prioritize compassion for others when overwhelmed. If asked before I arrived in Mombasa, I couldn't fathom the idea of meeting long lasting friends in such a

short period of a few weeks. And yet, I stand corrected. Through hygiene clinics and cultural treks, I have gained such a deep connection with like-minded students who share similar values of building community and prioritizing medical outreach. I am so grateful to have been able to meet such inspiring students, such as Melody, who have taught me the importance of trusting in myself, supporting those when they need it most, and enjoying the little blessings in life.

I have also learned the importance of compassion when connecting with patients, despite language barriers or time constraints. Taking the extra few seconds to smile or ask someone how they are doing, especially in their language, can make all the difference. While working in maternity during a night shift, I met a warrior of a mom, Mercy, giving birth. Although I had zero knowledge on how to provide support in a stressful situation like this, Mercy just wanted someone to hold her hand. We could barely understand each other, but we understood the simple but powerful meaning of physical touch during trying circumstances. Through tears and hand squeezing, we relied on compassion to mutually support each other. That night, she gave birth to a beautiful baby and overcame her temporary excruciating pain. Although I never got to see Mercy after that night, I knew the Lord was doing wonderful things through her. Compassion does not need to be flashy or grand. Compassion to me is putting the needs of those around you first, using love and kindness to guide you. I believe compassion is crucial in regard to working in the medical field, and this experience only amplified this opinion. Through compassion, we learn to put someone else's passions and desires before ours, relying on curiosity to help us learn about the people around us.

I have never agreed with the phrase, "curiosity killed the cat". Ever since I was little, I have been known as the kid who asks some of the weirdest and craziest questions. In most circumstances, many people can find this annoying. But, during my time in Mombasa, I was encouraged to constantly ask questions and learn from doctors, interns, Uber drivers, guides, and more! During my first week at the hospital, I felt like a fish out of water, drowning in the medical terminology bouncing between doctors and interns. I could not tell you the difference between a cyst and a mass or have any clue on how to read a CT scan before coming to this hospital. Through thoughtful doctors and interns, I was able to fully encapsulate my inquisitive self and learn different techniques of many patient care practices, fully translated from Swahili to English. With each stimulation class and engaging lecture, I could visually imagine the puzzle of my understanding of the medical system in Mombasa coming together, piece by piece. As someone who is passionate about understanding the cultural and political influences on HIV/AIDS in Mombasa, I have never felt more supported by doctors and interns to learn from them as I have in the CCC. Peter Mwazigne, the Medical Laboratory Officer of the CGTRH Molecular Laboratory, took precious time out of his day to show us around the research and microbiology lab, answering my endless questions about the role of USAID funding on HIV/AIDS diagnostics and

treatment. It is because of him that I gained a deeper understanding of this stigmatized disease, and I hope to share this knowledge with my friends and family.

Outside of the hospital, I have been able to learn and grow from IMA mentors, workers, fellow interns, and more! In endless conversations with Uber drivers and random people off the street, I have gained a deeper grasp of the history of Mombasa and the cultural concept of tribal lines. Everyone here is more than willing to answer my ignorant questions about tribal names (I can still only remember Luo, Luya, and Geriama out of 44 tribes) or well-known spots to visit while in Mombasa. Every single person I met here has taught me the importance of being curious and taking the time to care about what those around you are well-educated or passionate about. Providing this form of support and prioritization is a skill I will take with me in the medical field.

From baking with Eurastus to receiving inspirational advice from Grace, I have learned so many skills and have gained a deeper understanding of myself mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Curiosity is contagious, positively influencing those around you to desire to learn more. I hope to be that person wherever I go, helping people to never stop asking questions.

I am grateful that IMA has given me the opportunity to be surrounded by such impressive and creative mentors, colleagues, doctors, and interns. As an undergraduate student starting my medical journey, being around such intelligent individuals has influenced me to push past perceived limits and try new things, despite my fear of failure.

As someone who is passionate about the brain, I have used my internship experience to only further enhance my dream of becoming a neurosurgeon and using my skills to help those who need it most. You are never too old or educated to learn from those around you or make mistakes. No matter how prepared I am for any circumstance, this internship has taught me to expect the unexpected in the medical field, welcoming the unknown with open arms. I still have a long road ahead of me in order to become a neurosurgeon. That being said, this internship has reinforced a passionate fire in my heart that will guide me to my medical dreams through the power of God. Even as a potential surgeon, I hope to eventually use my skills to further support hospitals like CGTRH and remember why I got into the medical field in the first place: serving those who need it most. I cannot express my gratitude enough towards this life-changing program, and I will never forget the lessons I have gained from this experience.

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