

The Importance of Best Practices

by Grace Tazelaar, MS, RN

Are healthcare missions helping or hurting? Good intentions do not always mean good practice.

I hear reports of medical mission trips where unqualified people are distributing medications in Ziploc bags. I've also heard of children who have died because of an overdose of Tylenol. Mothers who cannot read or write have been given the medication by well-intentioned short-term medical teams. Tylenol may be an over-the-counter medication but if a child is given the incorrect dose or happens to accidentally swallow the pills in the non-childproof Ziploc bag, it can be deadly.

Good intentions, bad nursing practice.

A paradigm shift is taking place in healthcare missions. Historically doctors and nurses cared for their fellow missionaries and then built hospitals to care for the local people. To staff mission hospitals, many missions began nursing schools and educated personnel to staff remote medical clinics. Much of Africa's healthcare originated from mission organizations. But now Ministries of Health in these countries are educating their own healthcare professionals and are regulating healthcare practice. Just as we don't allow doctors and nurses to come to the U.S. and set up a temporary clinic, many countries are requiring that we respect and follow their laws.

Immediately after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, my email was flooded with the need for healthcare personnel and reports of people who were getting on planes and going there. Many others asked what they could do. Some of the messages came from missionaries who had been laboring in Haiti or who have personal connections there. They speak the language, know the people, and suffered with them, so the relief organizations often look to them to provide on-the-ground assistance. For example, a [Haitian school of nursing](#) with links to NCF had connected with Save the Children.

One young nursing student called and wanted to know how she could get to Haiti on her spring break. There are those who feel they must physically do something to help. I tried to suggest to her that maybe there were more qualified professionals who should go. A natural disaster may not be the best place for a novice nurse, no matter how well-intentioned. One short-term mission group that tried to rescue hurting children was taken into custody for child trafficking. They learned that good intentions do not always mean good practice.

This is the challenge of my work with [Nurses Christian Fellowship](#) – educating, encouraging, assisting and mentoring young nurses (and some older ones) to understand healthcare missions. How do I build on their enthusiasm for God and channel their desire to use the

knowledge and skills they have acquired in effective service for him? How do I protect them from becoming overzealous and making mistakes that could land them in jail or harm those they are going to serve? How do I pass along a lifetime of experience to the next generation of missionary nurses?

The World Health Organization (WHO) has published guidelines regarding outside medical assistance. These are international standards, derived from research conducted around the world. Yet many Christian organizations are totally unaware of these standards. I work closely with a group of people who share the concerns related to best practices in healthcare missions. We have posted the WHO guidelines on a website, [Best Practices in Global Health Missions](#).

I collaborated with nurses who have served on Mercy Ships to write an article for the *Journal of Christian Nursing* that addresses the issue of pharmacy-driven short-term mission trips, "[The Perils and Promise of Short-Term Healthcare Missions](#)."

There is still a great need for hands-on care around the world, yet today many of the requests for missionary nurses are for *nurse faculty* who are qualified to teach nursing. In limited-access countries, teaching medicine and nursing is a wonderful entrée to those countries. Many international nurses are coming to the U.S. to get advanced degrees to teach in their home countries. They are well-positioned to bring Christ to the people they care for and to their nursing colleagues when they return.

It is imperative that we give young nurses a view of current missionary nursing practice and help them understand where God may be calling them. Their good intentions to serve God by caring for others must be matched with good practice. We can pass along lessons we have learned so that they may build on them to advance God's Kingdom until Christ returns.



[Grace Tazelaar](#), MS, RN, is a veteran missionary nurse who offers wisdom from years of experience serving God cross-culturally. Find more resources, best practices, and what you need to know about missionary nursing at [NCF Missions](#).