



Perspective/Opinion

Relationships Above All Else: The Significance of Relationships in Global Partnerships

By Morgan Leissring, M3 – 2021 Dr. Elaine Kohler Global Summer Research Scholar

Student doctor Leissring was a Kohler Scholar during an entirely virtual global health summer. Her experience has encouraged her to think differently about the potential ways to further decolonize global health partnerships in her medical career and beyond.

Global health has been an ever-changing field of medicine and, recently, has been striving to decolonize its global efforts. As I reflect on my experience with the Kohler Scholar Summer Program, I can't help but think about how far we globally engaged humans have come, and how far we still must go in accomplishing this immense effort.

During the summer of 2021, my time as a Kohler Scholar was spent doing research remotely and attending a plethora of Zoom meetings with pediatric neurosurgeons in Hawassa, Ethiopia. Initially, I found it challenging to facilitate projects from afar and difficult to relate to my partners in Ethiopia, causing me to wonder: *How could I be of any assistance without stepping foot into their hospital? How could I understand the culture without being there? And how do I communicate effectively and appropriately in a different cultural context via Zoom and email?*

Although these were just a few of the many thoughts racing through my head during my first year, the more time I spent with the team, the more comfortable I became. Then, I realized that maybe this is potentially a less paternalistic way to facilitate global health research, especially as a medical student new to my mentors' well-established partnership. I had an opportunity to reconsider the role of a medical student newly entering this pre-established relationship. Imagine with me as I explain the reasoning for this very heavy statement I suggested above.

Instead of meeting new partners on the ground, what if we, as potential partners, first met online in a virtual capacity convenient to our new partners? Instead of time-consuming meet-and-greets at the global facility often coordinated by the hosting country, what if we coordinated a meet-and-greets online to establish an initial relationship without putting the burden on our hosts? Instead of having partners trust that we are committed and will not

become too busy to collaborate, what if we proved our intent, commitment, and capacity for partnership from afar before flying into their community?

Through the Kohler Scholar Summer Program, I was privileged to virtually meet our partners in Ethiopia, prove my commitment to their research project, and build a relationship rooted in trust over a few years. This reversed timeline has not only reframed how I perceive my experience as a Kohler Scholar, but it has provided a new framework to think about unique ways to continue the decolonization of global health, both now as a medical student and in my future as a physician.

Although initially disappointed about not traveling to meet our partners in person, I would not change the order of events, even if I could. Earning the trust of and proving passion for a community before stepping foot there could be a new way to remove the burden from our global partners, especially in new relationships. It requires time, dedication, and a true sense of responsibility to gain that trust as a medical student and provides global partners confidence when inviting someone new into their beautiful and often vulnerable communities.

Now, as I begin to think about my last year of medical school beginning in a few short months, I am excited for the privileged to meet the residents and surgeons I have been collaborating with for the last three years in their country, Ethiopia. I am thankful for the mentorship and guidance from Drs. Mary Schroeder and Christopher Dodgion as I learned to navigate global research on a completely virtual platform. And I am honored to have an opportunity to learn from our partners at Hawassa University during a global away rotation in my fourth year and see our research project in action in their hospital!

Morgan Leissring is a third-year medical student at MCW. She was a Dr. Elaine Kohler Summer Scholar in 2021. She currently collaborates with Drs. Libby Schroeder and Chris Dodgion to aid in traumatic brain injury research with their global partners at Hawassa University Comprehensive Specialized Hospital in Hawassa, Ethiopia.