



Médecins Sans Frontières-UK: Returners' Talk and Volunteer Link

Médecins Sans Frontières MSF (Doctors Without Borders) is an independent humanitarian medical aid organisation committed to providing medical aid where it is most needed, regardless of race, religion, politics or gender and also to raising awareness of the plight of the people they help.

The UK office was established in London in 1993. It supports MSF's field work through recruiting volunteers, collecting donations and raising awareness of humanitarian crises through the media. A specialist medical team works directly with the field projects to help solve urgent clinical problems.

MSF-UK has between 180 and 200 International staff returning from areas of acute crisis annually. There are formal and informal opportunities for returning staff to talk about their experience in the field and decide whether additional support is needed.

At the end of their assignment, each staff member is required to return through one of 5 Operational Centres for a "returners' talk", offered by a qualified psychological practitioner who understands the specific pressures of working in unstable environments.

In rare cases where field staff do not pass through an operational centre, MSF-UK uses a consultant psychotherapist to ensure that all staff have received the returners' talk. The consultant psychotherapist is also available for confidential sessions for returning staff when the staff person requests clinical counselling.

When the worker returns to the UK, they receive a debriefing/exit interview in the office and are subsequently followed up through a system called "Volunteer Link". This system includes a Volunteer Link Coordinator and ten Volunteer Link Representatives. All of the Representatives have previously worked with MSF and are selected by the Coordinator for their sensitivity to the emotional needs of returning staff. The Volunteer Link Coordinator is a staff member of MSF who arranges for all returned workers to receive a telephone call from a Representative six to eight weeks after return. The Representatives are not clinical but receive training by the Volunteer Link Coordinator and the consultant psychotherapist in supporting returning staff.

A senior HR manager said, "In terms of psychological health, the availability of an external and confidential follow-up phone call by Volunteer Link is one of the most helpful practices. Initiating conversation with the returning staff gives them an opportunity to talk about the re-entry experience and provides an avenue for professional psychological support though referral to a psychologist that they may not pursue otherwise".