

DOCTORS WITHOUT BORDERS

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DOCTORS WITHOUT BORDERS

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Snouwen worked with MSF (Médecins Sans Frontières, "Doctors Without Borders" in French) for two years, though not as medical personnel. There are three basic categories MSF volunteers fall under: medical, logistics, and administrative finance. I worked on the administrative side hiring, managing, and paying the staff that the medical team needed to operate, and financing all the needs of the logistical team.



Working for MSF is, as with any job, a mixed bag -- it is simultaneously incredibly rewarding and terribly frustrating. There are five different "desks" that run MSF missions: Spain, France, Belgium, Switzerland, and Holland. [All other countries fall under one of these five -- ex. the U.S. and Japanese offices are part of the French desk.] As you can imagine, each desk is run totally different from the others in terms of hiring/training practices, work team philosophy, etc. so my experience with the French desk was entirely different than with the Belgians.

(not leaving the compound), when riots a block or two away spilled across the neighborhood and spread around the city, when we didn't know if the armed rioters running past the gates would try to storm the grounds, when tear gas streamed into the office and caused work delays, and even when team members were abducted (and then, sooooo thankfully, returned in good health).

Location

72+

Countries and territories are home to our medical humanitarian projects

Quite possibly the most stressful day of my life was one when the riots were so bad that our staff members couldn't leave their houses for fear of their lives and the entire city was on a sort of lockdown. No tap-taps (the Italian version of a public bus) ran, no cars were on the road. My largest hospital was an hour away on the other side of town and held 450+ patients at the time (100% capacity). Only 8 of 90 nurses were able to make it to work that day, and the 450 patients were all in critical need of medical care to treat their cholera in the 2- to 3-day window before they died -- i.e. each day was crucial. I had no way of getting the nurses to the hospital, nor of getting the patients adequate staff to maintain their care. My heart rate rises just thinking about the frantic scrambling that took place that day.

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My work with MSF was mainly in Port-au-Prince, Haiti following the 2010 earthquake and subsequent cholera epidemic (two different missions). Being that I worked on emergencies, the dynamics of the teams were night and day from what one might encounter on a long-term, stable project (i.e. malnutrition).

To work on an emergency (natural disasters, outbreak of health epidemics), you need to be a bit of an adrenaline junkie and a masochist. Though I, personally, haven't worked in war zones, I've friends who were first-responders in both Libya and Syria and I can tell you that instability is instability, whether there's a "direct" threat of violence or indirect. There were numerous times in Haiti when we were on lockdown.

My family and I visited The Epcot center this summer. The weather was nice, and Epcot was amazing! I had a great summer together with my family!