

Advice for dental electives

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What is an elective and why should I do one?

A dental elective is a clinical placement where you can experience different sides of dentistry, from working in developing countries with the bare minimum of materials and equipment, to working in specialist fields with state-of-the-art technology. Going abroad for an elective is a great way to open your eyes to dentistry in different countries. It provides experience working within different cultures and learning the limitations that some countries face on a day-to-day basis. It is also a great way to keep your brain in 'dental mode' during the summer!

When should I do an elective?

This is very much dependent on your degree and dental school. Some will incorporate an elective as part of their programme, but this was not the case for my course and, so, it was something I went about organising myself during the summer of my third year. By this time, I had completed all my practical competencies and felt I was well equipped with the skills and experience needed to get the most out of my elective.

I spent 4 weeks of my summer in Zambia; this allowed enough time to familiarise myself with the hospital and city in which I was working, to get to know the people I was working with and to explore the country, learn about the culture and ultimately be a 'tourist'. It also meant I had time before and after my elective for some 'R&R' at home before heading back to university in September.

Where should I go and who should I go with?

Here are some things you may wish to consider to help you make your decision on where to go and which provider to go with.

How long is the travel time? There are many different locations and opportunities for electives. Where you choose is dependent on which part of the world you want to see and explore. It's important to consider how long it is going to take you to get there. If you are only on placement for a short while, you may not want to spend the best part of 24 hours on a plane. Don't forget to factor in transfer times from the airport: for some locations you may have a long bus/car journey the other side.

What to organise yourself and what will be organised for you
 The company I went with was Work the World (www.worktheworld.co.uk). Luckily, they did almost everything for me: transport from the airport, accommodation, hospital/city orientation and work visas. This was great as it took a lot of the pressure off. All I really had to think about were flights and immunisations. (On a side note, don't forget to get your travel vaccines sorted early – I left mine quite late and ended up having one in each arm on the same day, which is not comfortable!). You can check what vaccines you need on the NHS website (www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk/destinations).

There are many different companies offering elective packages as well as Work the World, including:

- Elective Africa (www.electiveafrica.com/program/dentistry_electives)
- Floating Doctors (www.floatingdoctors.com/programs/dental/)
- One-2-One (<http://one2oneworld.org/>)

How much is it going to cost me? Dental electives are not cheap. It's important to consider the length of time you wish to go for and research different travel options. Make sure you know the full breakdown of costs when looking at the different companies. Some will cover accommodation, airport transfers and meals, whilst others will consider these extra costs. Don't forget to budget for spending money too: a big part of your elective will be exploring and experiencing a new country and culture! Keep a look out for bursaries or grants from professional bodies to help fund your trip, for example, the British Medical and Dental Students' Trust–Royal Society of Medicine (BMDST-RSM) Student Elective Awards (www.rsm.ac.uk/prizes-and-awards/travel-grants-and-bursaries/).

Is the company a non-profit organisation? This is something I didn't consider when I organised my trip. I thoroughly enjoyed my elective and got a great deal of experience. Being in the hospital allowed me to see lots of different cases, such as general dentistry, maxillofacial surgery and acute trauma patients, such as road traffic accidents and Ludwig's Angina. However, friends who completed an elective with a charity organisation also had a great experience; they found it very rewarding being in a position to help those with little or no access to any other dental care.

Will I get hands-on experience or will it be more observational? If you want to get 'stuck in' assisting in clinics, a more observational placement isn't going to be for you. However, you want to make sure the placement you choose has suitable supervision. As students, there are things we haven't seen or done before and you do not want to get yourself into a situation you cannot handle.

What other departments are available to visit? I had the opportunity to visit the maxillofacial team for part of my elective; observing in theatre and assisting with their clinics was a great experience. This isn't something that will necessarily be advertised, so it is important you ask questions about possible opportunities beforehand.



Figure 1. Dental Unit, University Teaching Hospital, Lusaka, Zambia.

What type of clinic will I be based in? Working in a busy city hospital is completely different to working in a rural clinic and so it's important to find out what environment you'll be placed in. Luckily, I had the opportunity to spend time in the hospital in the capital of Zambia as well as spending time in a rural village living with a host family. These were completely contrasting experiences and it was fantastic to see both sides. The hospital had the standard set-up of dental chair (**Figure 1**), dental equipment and access to radiographs, whereas in the rural village there was no facility for dentistry at all. I was seeing patients who had been experiencing problems for years and had to do the best I could for them with the little equipment that was available (**Figure 2**).



Figure 2. Examination of patient in pain in a rural village outside of Chirundu, Zambia.

What activities/sights are there in the area? Although a lot of your time will be spent working in the clinics, evenings and weekends are your time to explore the country you have chosen to visit. It's wise to research this before you go: plan what you want to see and do whilst you're away. I visited Victoria Falls (**Figure 3**), which was beautiful, and went on multiple safaris (**Figure 4**).



Figure 3. Victoria Falls, Livingstone, Zambia.

What language is spoken locally? Will there be a language barrier? Remember English may not be the dominant language where you are going, therefore, you may want to think about learning some of the language before you go. Luckily for me, English is the official language of Zambia, so it was easy to converse with both dentists and patients in most situations. Bear in mind that the professionals you are working with will be busy, so if you don't speak the language, it may not be possible for them to translate every conversation for you.

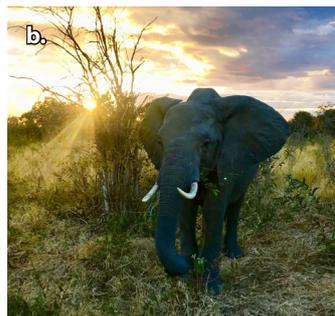


Figure 4. Safari excursions. (a) Ready for our overnight safari, Chobe National Park, Botswana. **(b)** Elephant at Sunset, Chobe National Park, Botswana.

What's the risk? Travelling to an unfamiliar country can be dangerous for a number of reasons: there may be unrest in the country, high crime rates, as well as health risks, such as common diseases or high rates of blood-borne viruses. The gov.uk website on travel advice (www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice) is a good place to start as it gives information on safety and security, terrorism, law and health. It will give a good idea of what the country is like as a whole and how safe you will be. It's advisable to ask about where you'll be staying and how you'll get to and from your place of work. Is it a secure compound? Will you be on public transport or walking? Don't forget indemnity insurance for whilst you're away; you can easily contact the Dental Defence Union (DDU) or Dental Protection, who can advise how to acquire this and it is usually free in most instances (<https://www.theddu.com/for-students/your-elective/electives-guide/2018-electives-guide/how-we-can-help-you> and <https://www.dentalprotection.org/uk/benefits-renewal/student-dentist/your-elective>). Like all trips abroad, you'll need to consider travel insurance. I purchased a comprehensive package from the company I went with, which covered extra things such as cancellations for exam failure, exposures to biological fluids, HIV needle-stick injuries, medical equipment cover and student loan cover for injuries limiting study. If you use an independent company you will need to ensure that they will cover you for these things, which may be additional costs.

The lowlights?

With all trips there are going to be ups and downs along the way.

- Location: although I managed to get out and do a lot of fantastic things, it took a lot of travelling and organising as most activities were quite far out from where I stayed in Lusaka. This is why it is really important to thoroughly research where you will be staying and what there is to do in the local area.

- Physically and emotionally draining: I experienced some challenging sights whilst away. Witnessing a young boy who had recently been involved in a road traffic accident to patients who had passed away on the wards. Make sure you get some downtime to recuperate after the long days and that you have people around you to speak to if you have a particularly challenging day.

Despite this, all these challenges add to the overall experience of the elective.

The highlights?

- You'll get to see another part of the world and experience life from another perspective. Working in another country, alongside some wonderful, experienced people and learning how dentistry works in a developing world is a privilege.

- You'll meet people from all over the world. I made friends who I am still in contact with now and hope to be for a long time.

- By immersing yourself into that country's way of living, you'll be able to experience the culture in a way you wouldn't by travelling there on holiday.

Take full advantage of the sights whilst you're away. We flew to Livingstone to see Victoria Falls, which is a must – it's clear to see why it is one of the natural wonders of the world! From there, we took a boat across the river to Botswana and spent 2 days in the African bush on safari, getting really close to Africa's big five and eating dinner around a campfire! It really was one of the best experiences of my life so far.

By going with a company, I had people who I could contact and ask all these questions during the run up to my trip. They were on hand via phone or email when I needed them, both whilst in the UK and abroad. For me it was the best way to make organising a trip like

this the easiest and most convenient experience. If you decided to organise an elective independently, I would advise you to thoroughly research where you are going and get help and guidance from as many people as possible with experience in this area to ensure nothing gets forgotten. I would highly recommend doing an elective to anyone, it has really been one of the most memorable parts of my degree. You get to put into practice everything that you have been taught and get to see dentistry in a whole other light.

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