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Experience abroad reflection

Introduction

My journey to Italy was more than just an opportunity to engage in professional work—it was a profound experience that allowed me to immerse myself in a different culture, understand complex social issues, and develop critical skills that will shape my future career. This reflection explores my time in Milan and Castel Volturno, highlighting the key takeaways and the cultural competencies I developed during this transformative period.

The Milan Experience: A First Encounter with Emergency's Mission

When I arrived in Milan, I was immediately struck by the city's vibrancy and the sense of history that permeated its streets. However, my focus was quickly directed toward understanding Emergency's operations and how this globally recognized NGO functions in its home country. The headquarters of Emergency became the epicenter of my learning experience. The organization's mission to provide free, high-quality healthcare to victims of war, poverty, and landmines worldwide resonated deeply with me, and I was eager to contribute in any way I could.

My first few days were spent getting acclimated to the operations in Milan, where I participated in mobile clinic rotations. These clinics serve as lifelines for immigrants, providing essential healthcare services that are often inaccessible through traditional means due to language barriers, fear of legal repercussions, or lack of knowledge about the healthcare system. As I engaged with patients from diverse backgrounds, I quickly realized the importance of cultural sensitivity in healthcare delivery.

For instance, while working at the mobile clinics, I encountered patients from various parts of West Africa. Each group had its own unique set of cultural beliefs, practices, and challenges. Understanding these differences was crucial in providing care that was not only effective but

also respectful of their cultural contexts. I learned that building trust with patients often required more than just medical expertise; it involved active listening, empathy, and a willingness to meet them where they were—both literally and figuratively.

One particularly memorable experience was a Somali woman who had just arrived in Italy after a harrowing journey. She was visibly distressed and reluctant to speak with anyone at the clinic. Recognizing the signs of trauma, I observed closely as the cultural mediator managed to create a safe space for her to share her experiences. Through this process, I realized the importance of cultural mediators in bridging the gap between healthcare providers and patients from diverse backgrounds. Their role was not just to translate language but to interpret cultural nuances, making them invaluable in delivering holistic care.

Castel Volturno: A Deep Dive into the Nigerian Diaspora

The second half of my journey took me to Castel Volturno, a small town in southern Italy that is home to one of the largest Nigerian communities in Europe. This part of the experience was particularly poignant for me, as it allowed me to connect with a community that shared my cultural background but was living under vastly different circumstances.

Castel Volturno felt like a slice of Nigeria transplanted into Italy. The streets were lined with African stores, the sounds of Pidgin English and Yoruba filled the air, and the aroma of Nigerian cuisine wafted from street vendors and small eateries. However, beneath this veneer of familiarity lay a community grappling with severe socio-economic challenges, including high unemployment, racial discrimination, and limited access to essential services.

My primary task in Castel Volturno was to conduct interviews with Nigerian immigrant women, focusing on their experiences with accessing healthcare in Italy. These interviews were part of a

broader initiative by Emergency to understand the unique needs of migrant populations and to develop targeted interventions that could improve healthcare access and outcomes.

The stories these women shared were both heartbreaking and eye-opening. Many of them had endured unimaginable hardships on their journey to Italy. They spoke of fleeing violence and poverty in Nigeria, only to find themselves trapped in Libya, where they were subjected to physical and sexual abuse, forced labor, and extreme violence. Their journeys across the Mediterranean were fraught with danger, and many had lost friends and loved ones along the way.

Listening to these stories was incredibly difficult. As a Nigerian, I felt a deep sense of connection to these women, and their pain resonated with me on a personal level. At the same time, I was struck by their resilience and determination to build better lives for themselves and their families, despite the overwhelming odds against them.

One of the key takeaways from these interviews was the importance of cultural competence in healthcare. The women's experiences highlighted the fact that healthcare is not just about treating physical ailments; it is about understanding the broader context of patients' lives, including their cultural beliefs, social circumstances, and past traumas. For example, many of the women were hesitant to seek prenatal care due to cultural beliefs about pregnancy and fears of the 'evil eye.' Others had experienced discrimination or felt alienated by the healthcare system, which led to delays in seeking care.

These insights were critical in helping Emergency tailor its services to better meet the needs of the Nigerian community in Castel Volturno. For instance, we discussed the possibility of incorporating traditional birth practices into the care provided by the clinics, as well as increasing outreach efforts to build trust within the community. These strategies were aimed at

making healthcare more accessible and culturally sensitive, thereby improving outcomes for women and their families.

Cultural Competencies Developed

My time in Italy allowed me to develop several key cultural competencies that will undoubtedly shape my future work in healthcare and beyond.

1. **Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity:** I learned to recognize and respect the cultural differences that exist within diverse populations. This competency was essential in building trust with patients and ensuring that the care provided was aligned with their cultural beliefs and practices.
2. **Effective Communication:** Working with patients who spoke different languages and came from different cultural backgrounds taught me the importance of clear and empathetic communication. I developed strategies for overcoming language barriers, such as using visual aids, simple language, and working closely with cultural mediators.
3. **Cultural Humility:** This experience reinforced the importance of approaching every interaction with humility and a willingness to learn. I realized that I do not have all the answers and that it is crucial to listen to and learn from the people I am serving.
4. **Adaptability:** Navigating the complexities of healthcare in a foreign country required me to be flexible and adaptable. I learned to adjust my approaches based on the specific needs and circumstances of the patients I was working with.
5. **Ethical Considerations:** The ethical dilemmas I encountered, such as respecting cultural beliefs while ensuring that patients received necessary medical care, were challenging but ultimately enriching. These experiences deepened my understanding of the ethical responsibilities involved in providing care across cultures.

Takeaways and Future Implications

Reflecting on my time in Italy, I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to work with Emergency and to engage with the diverse communities they serve. This experience has broadened my understanding of global health issues and the role that cultural competence plays in addressing them.

One of the most significant takeaways from this experience is the importance of cultural competence in healthcare. In an increasingly globalized world, healthcare providers must be equipped to work with patients from diverse backgrounds. This means not only understanding different cultural beliefs and practices but also recognizing the social and economic factors that influence health outcomes.

Moving forward, I am committed to integrating the cultural competencies I developed in Italy into my future work. Whether I am working in a clinical setting, conducting research, or engaging in public health initiatives, I will approach each situation with cultural awareness, humility, and a commitment to providing care that is respectful, compassionate, and effective.

Moreover, this experience has reinforced my passion for working with marginalized and underserved communities. The stories I heard in Castel Volturno have inspired me to continue advocating for equitable healthcare access and to seek out opportunities to make a positive impact on the lives of those who are often overlooked by the healthcare system.

In conclusion, my experience in Italy was transformative in every sense of the word. It challenged me to step out of my comfort zone, to confront difficult realities, and to grow both personally and professionally. The cultural competencies I developed during this time will serve as a foundation for my future work, guiding me as I strive to make a meaningful difference in the world.