

HUMANITARIAN AID – COURSES FOR NURSING STAFF

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Friday, 18th January 2002: The Swiss Tropical Institute in Basel / Switzerland for the first time awards certificates of the “Master in International Health” Program. A colleague and myself, the two first female graduates, are nurses. Is this a coincidence?

It is certainly not a coincidence that a considerable number of humanitarian workers in medical relief programs are nurses.

The responsibilities in such missions however are very far from typical nursing care. Much more is it the general organisation of health care in emergencies, be it refugee camps, the response to epidemics or the organisation of nutrition programs.

Preconditions are the ability to work in international and interdisciplinary teams constructively and innovatively, the willingness to work in very different (cultural) circumstances and the skill to solve as many problems as possible with very limited resources. Nurses have often successfully played that part, and in addition bring along the essential medical knowledge that is required in order to react quickly to health needs in emergencies.

But all this is not enough. The belief that a solid professional training in the western world is sufficient to go and “do good” is outdated since a long time. Humanitarian aid has turned into a challenging field of action in which people have to be ready to consequently develop their knowledge and skills in order to reach up to the challenges of today’s humanitarian programs. Professional medical aid requires competent project management that is carefully thought through from the planning to the evaluation, in accordance with relevant standards and indicators. The organisation and management of aid programs pose special challenges in intercultural settings and in complex political contexts. These demand managerial and analytical skills that have to be acquired. An understanding of Public Health and Epidemiology is an absolute necessity when rapid medical relief or the rehabilitation of a health system is required after a natural or political disaster. The fight against epidemic diseases such as Cholera or Ebola requires special knowledge.

The TropEdEurop “Master in International Health“ is a relatively new program that aims at fulfilling such requirements. 19 member institutions in 10 European countries offer a variety of courses, of which participants can choose and compose a program that covers their individual needs. The required number of course modules can be attended over a period of up to five years, and has to be done in at least two different member institutions. Participants enrol with one partner institution of their choice, where they undertake a three month core course, and from where a tutor will support them throughout their studies as well as during the writing of the final thesis.

Being among the first TropEd graduates I certainly can confirm the following: The TropEdEurop offers a flexible and varied program, which, according to my own experience is well compatible with practical work in the field. A combination which was very useful and enriching for me over the past five years, and which I believe also reflects a reality for humanitarian workers: Our learning has to happen in theory and practice and it is never going to end – not even with a Master’s certificate.