

Abstract

Lived Experiences of Healthcare Volunteers in Humanitarian Missions: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study

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Introduction. Surgical humanitarian missions are complex contexts where healthcare professionals operate in resource-limited settings. This study explores the lived experiences of volunteers involved in non-emergency cleft lip and palate surgical missions in low- and middle-income countries, focusing on pre-mission, in-mission, and post-mission dimensions.

Methods. A qualitative study was conducted using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach and analyzed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. In-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with volunteers who had participated in humanitarian missions. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and independently analyzed by two researchers until thematic saturation was reached.

Results. The sample included 17 participants, mainly nurses and physicians with extensive mission experience. Fieldwork involved cultural shock, clinical adaptation, and strong emotional engagement. Major challenges included limited resources, cultural barriers, and organizational constraints. Missions also produced significant personal and professional growth.

Discussion. Humanitarian missions emerged as transformative experiences that reshape professional identity, values, and meanings of care. Findings highlight the importance of integrating technical preparation, relational support, and reflection to promote sustainable and ethically aware humanitarian healthcare interventions.

Keywords: Healthcare Workers, Humanitarian Missions, Professional Identity, Participatory Methodology, Focus Groups, Thematic Analysis

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