

## **Internship at the World Health Organization, Geneva, Switzerland**

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During my junior fall, I was given the opportunity to intern at the World Health Organization, in Geneva, Switzerland. This term proved to be one of the most rewarding and eye-opening periods of my life, and provided me with vast insights into the field of public health, into the workings of the United Nations, and into the benefits and challenges of living independently in a foreign setting.

The World Health Organization is the United Nations specialized agency for health, and is the foremost global authority in issues of public health. Established in 1948, the WHO's objective, as outlined in its Constitution, is the "attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health," with health defined constitutionally as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." The WHO is governed by 193 member states through the World Health Assembly. While the headquarters of the agency are located in Geneva, Switzerland, other regional bases are found on each continent.

As an organization, the WHO's headquarters are managed by a Director General, and are divided into eight clusters, each of which is managed by an Assistant Director General. I worked within the Sustainable Developments and Healthy Environments Cluster, within the Food Safety, Zoonoses and Foodborne Diseases Department. Almost all of my efforts were focused on Avian Influenza (AI), a global health concern that is managed by three separate departments in the WHO.

As an intern, I was responsible for an array of tasks. The majority of my efforts were focused on writing a report entitled, "Guidelines for the Safe Use of Fertilizer in

Areas Affected by Avian Influenza A (H5N1).” Using WHO publications, information from other scientific journal, and a rough set of objectives designated by my supervisor, I was given the freedom to create a report that will be used online and in print by the WHO. Writing these guidelines, under the constraints of the WHO’s standard operating procedures, was both a challenge and an enriching learning experience.

In addition to writing this document, I was also given the daily responsibility of contributing to “rumor-checking” efforts. Each morning, I used a private online public health database to scan the headlines of the past twenty-four hours, drawing from almost all media publications worldwide. I would then compile a daily list that included a brief description of any food-safety or Avian Influenza event that had transpired over the past day. This list was used to note incidents, after which governmental follow-up would take place, to determine whether false rumor propagation had been identified, or whether the reported incidents had in fact occurred. This routine allowed the FOS department to keep tab on any trends, on a global scale, within public health, AI and food safety. For instance, by noting that a related (albeit minor) food poisoning incident had taken place in six independent South-East Asian locations, a prompt and effective preventative reaction could then be put into motion by FOS.

Further, as an intern, I was granted exposure and access to many interesting settings. For instance, I was able to attend a videoconference with the head of my department, and four others from FOS. Within this videoconference, delegates were present from Canada, the United States, Ireland, England, Australia, Namibia, and the FAO in Rome. While my role in the conference was simply to assist in the taking of minutes, the experience of sitting in front of the giant, pale blue UN backdrop and

experiencing simultaneous video communication with AI experts around the globe was humbling, and a bit surreal.

A great deal of that which I took away from my internship, though, was not work-related, but rather focused on my co-workers, friends, and the general UN atmosphere.

As evidenced in its constitutional statements, the WHO is truly an organization dedicated to caring for the well-being of people on a global scale, and as such, all WHO documents are translated into the six official United Nations languages (English, French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese and Arabic). One of the highlights of my experiences was the opportunity to assist in the French-to-English translation of some newly written FOS documents. While unrelated to public health, the international aspect of working for the WHO was very rewarding. Even in the halls of the headquarters, I took great pleasure in the international flavor. The WHO encourages employees to dress for work in a way that displays their background or heritage. This policy made for unique and interesting people-watching, and an overall celebratory and inclusive atmosphere.

This joyous feeling extended to my specific department. The people with whom I worked were consistently friendly, informative and helpful. As an intern, I was treated with a great deal of respect – I was almost always given several tasks to do at a time, and the order and priority given to each was entirely self-determined. My supervisor, though quite busy, was supportive and provided helpful guidance. Others in the department were also appreciative of my presence. With backgrounds in various aspects of medicine, law and public health, and experiences in the CDC, NIH, and FDA, conversations with those in my department were eye-opening. As an intern I was able to gain insider's advice and

make valuable connections and friendships with those working in FOS and other public health institutions.

Along similar lines, the other WHO interns were perhaps the most fun and interesting part of my experience in Geneva. As the only intern working in Avian Influenza, conversations with other WHO interns were always unique, and at times funny, with introductions such as, “I’m from cholera, where do you work?” proving to be quite common. By getting to know other interns from HIV/AIDS, malaria, trade and ethics, health law, women’s reproductive rights and mental health, unique connections and comparisons were made. The other interns at WHO had such varied backgrounds and were from all over the world, which made living (alone) in Geneva a positive, and much less daunting, experience.

Overall, I cannot speak highly enough about my term in Geneva, and my internship at the WHO. Without the support of the Dickey Center, this meaningful experience would have not taken place. The generosity of the Dickey Center truly allowed me to immerse myself in my WHO internship, and enabled me to get the most out of my time in Geneva.