

Career Advice

Global Health Jobs: What You Need to Know©

By [Oliver Subasinghe](#) on 07 April 2009



Unified Health System staff train nurses in Recife, Brazil, in a program funded by the Inter-American Development Bank. Building local capacity is a key focus of many global health practitioners. Photo by: Willie Heinz/IDB

Afraid of needles? Most jobs in [global health](#) don't require a lab coat or medical degree. This growing field offers career paths ranging from the extremely technical to more generalist positions, from epidemiologist to social marketer.

Global health addresses issues that cut across multiple borders, such as the eradication of tuberculosis - unlike international health, which is seen as tackling problems that mainly affect two countries, such as a cholera outbreak in a border region. Unlike some economic development work, global health can result in nearly instantaneous results, experts say.

"In development, it's hard to see the changes you're making. But in some areas of health, you can actually see the changes year to year," one human resources expert said. "Other changes may take a generation or two."

In response to [growing health inequalities](#), public donors ramped up funding for global health to more than \$12.6 billion in 2006, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Additionally, private entities such as the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#) have contributed billions more towards health issues.

This expansion should translate into more career opportunities and resources to address [global health challenges](#) - from reproductive health to child survival, infectious diseases to HIV/AIDS, mental health and emergency medicine to nutrition, water and sanitation. Among the emerging issues donors are beginning to address is the treatment and prevention of chronic illnesses like heart disease.

The needed global health workforce may exceed 100,000 by 2020, a U.S. global health professor estimates. They will be working for a variety of international organizations such as the World Health Organization and Red Cross, government agencies such as the U.K.'s Department of International Development, nonprofits like [Path](#), Medecins Sans Frontieres and other emergency aid organizations, as well as companies such as [Pfizer Inc.](#), the drug maker.

Prerequisites

Often, positions in global health require a doctoral degree or a master's of public health (MPH), health administration (MHA), global health or health economics. Even candidates with a medical doctorate or nursing degree may need a master's that covers management, policy, social or economic topics in this multidisciplinary field.

For career switchers with a clinical background, a master's degree can bridge experiences in medical care and development, said a former doctor at the [Pan-American Health Organization](#) who holds a master's of public health.

The theoretical side of global health should also be coupled with some practical volunteer, fellowship or work experience in a resource-deprived community. For example, the U.S. Agency for International Development offers a [global health fellowship program](#) for U.S. citizens to gain practical experience in the field or at its headquarters. St. Louis University's School of Public Health [lists dozens of fellowship](#)

[programs](#) open to people from around the world. Volunteer organizations like Voluntary Service Overseas and the Peace Corps offer many opportunities to work on health-related issues in the field, either directly or indirectly.

Foreign language skills are key to many jobs in global health. Knowledge of Russian, Portuguese and French West African dialects are in demand by global health organizations, one industry expert said. For job seekers in the developing world, a strong command of English or other donor country languages are essential.

But before applying to graduate school or a fellowship, those interested in global health should pick a particular health issue they feel passionate about, recruiters suggest, and then decide on which career discipline would make the best fit.

Global health disciplines

The global health sector may be split into seven broad disciplines: researchers, clinicians, epidemiologists, program managers, program administrators, social marketers and health policy analysts. Along with an advanced degree and field experience, recruiters identified soft skills such as flexibility, cultural sensitivity and the ability to "read" people as important for most global health positions.

Researcher

For those with an interest in curing a neglected disease or finding a low-cost way to deliver AIDS drugs, a career in research may be the right path. As more funds are being devoted to diseases that mainly affect the developing world, such as malaria or leprosy, there is increasing opportunities to study and eradicate these health scourges as a medical researcher at academic institutions, foundations or drug makers.

Research opportunities exist even outside the laboratory, on issues such as health economics or health systems administration. A medical doctorate or postgraduate degree is usually needed for such work. If lab work or academia does not sound appealing, then research utilization - bringing research out of the classroom into the field - might be an alternative path. Academic institutions such as Tulane University Law School's [Payson Center for International Development](#), the [University of Washington's Department of Global Health](#) and [George Mason University's](#) College of Health and Human Services focus on this.

Epidemiologist

Epidemiologists prevent, monitor and respond to disease outbreaks, for instance by designing vaccination campaigns. On a near-daily basis, epidemiologists analyze disease patterns and investigate what started an outbreak. Someone with an interest in biology, statistics and frequent travel into the field may especially like this discipline. International organizations such as WHO and the Pan-American Health Organization are among the major employers of epidemiologists.

Clinician

This includes "traditional" medical professions such as doctor, nurse, midwife, psychologist and other health workers. However, direct contact with patients is rare, as global health programs tend to focus on health systems and management. Still, in some niches - including humanitarian aid and disaster response - there is a need for health workers to directly treat patients.

Program manager

Program managers oversee the design, evaluation, monitoring and implementation of global health programs in the field or at headquarters. This may involve running an immunization campaign, managing a refugee camp or building local health capacity in a developing country. A master's degree in health, business administration or international development is almost always required, along with foreign language skills and some previous work experience. Nonprofits and other global health organizations are increasingly hiring developing country nationals instead of expats for program manager positions, although the availability of well-trained and experienced candidates varies greatly depending on the country.

Organizations such as Engender, Care International, Chemonics International Inc., International Medical Corps, WYG International and others are periodically seeking to hire program managers.

Job seekers who wish to design health programs may find a medical or nursing degree a good first step, but they must have some experience working on a global health issue or international development.

Program assistant or administrator

These positions support programs in the field with "back office" work such as accounting, budgeting, recruiting, and grant proposal writing. While program assistants handle tasks related to a particular project or program, administrators tend to be focused on an entire organization. The most program administrator vacancies can be found in the nonprofit sector.

Program assistants and administrators may not require an advanced degree.

Social marketer or health educator

These global health disciplines involve the promotion of healthy behaviors in a culturally appropriate way. Many techniques in [social marketing](#) have been adapted from the private sector. Health education may involve capacity building efforts and the design and supply of health products to underserved communities.

Some employers require a background in the commercial sector, especially in marketing or raising the awareness of public health issues. Experience in developing countries is often mandatory.

Organizations that work on social marketing and health education initiatives include the [Academy for Educational Development](#), BroadReach Healthcare, Population Services International and Futures Group International.

Policy analyst

For those with an interest in the "big picture" of improving global health or in helping countries to improve health care, a position as policy analyst may be a good fit. These are usually higher-level positions for candidates with more experience, but there are opportunities for more junior analysts to conduct research on policy issues. An MPH or higher degree is always a prerequisite.

Policy work is usually done at government agencies, think tanks or donors such as the World Bank, [Rand Corp.](#) or Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The global health profession is constantly evolving and, as its scope of work expands, new disciplines emerge. Such career tracks may involve work on the environment, water and sanitation, for instance.

Several Web sites offer job listings and useful information on global health careers. [Devex](#) provides jobs, business opportunities and news, as well as listings of [top global health organizations](#). The Global Health Council provides extensive information on global health issues and jobs. Humanitarian aid consortium InterAction offers a fee-based online jobs board that includes positions in the emergency health field.

[Oliver Subasinghe](#) is a Devex international development correspondent in Washington, D.C. He previously served as a microfinance fellow for Kiva.org in Kenya and Uganda. During his tenure, he worked with Kiva's field partners to improve their operations and governance. He holds a bachelor's degree from Eckerd College and a master's in business from the College of William & Mary's Mason School of Business.