

# *ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF PROTOCOL CHANGES IN THE PREVENTION OF MOTHER-TO-CHILD TRANSMISSION OF HIV*



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## Project Overview

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Department: Nursing

Organization: Zanmi Lasante

Location: Lascahobas/Petite Riviere de l'Artibonite/St. Marc, Haiti

Mentor: Jodi Tuck, Faculty Lecturer

Fellowship Duration: September 3, 2015 – December 8, 2015



## About the McBurney Fellowship Program

Through McGill's Institute for Health and Social Policy, the McBurney Fellowship Program supports students in international service programs related to health and social policy in Latin America. McBurney Fellows serve abroad in organizations working to meet the basic needs of local populations. One key aspect of this fellowship is its mandate to make a significant contribution to improving the health and social conditions of poor and marginalized populations through the delivery of concrete and measurable interventions. Students and their mentors identify issues, make connections with local organizations, and develop a strategy for the fellowship. The views expressed in this document are the opinions of the fellow, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the IHSP.

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## **Fellowship Rationale**

I believe that our educational institutions have a responsibility for providing opportunities for students to have cultural exposure beyond that which is encountered in a multicultural country like Canada. Despite such diversity around us, we often become unaware of our prejudices and ignorance about different vulnerable and marginalized groups.

As a nurse, it is important to understand the structural and social determinants of health that impact such communities around the world. This is why having the opportunity to work in a limited resource setting provided by the McBurney Fellowship is an invaluable learning experience for individuals aspiring to work in the health field. Being immersed in a different cultural and sociopolitical environment provides a rich opportunity for students to be fully engaged with and understand the unique barriers and facilitators to health for different cultures. Zanmi Lasante has been welcoming nursing students since 2013 with the aim to help improve continuing nursing education in Haiti.

At the base of the collaboration is the French language since practicing nurses in Quebec must be able to function in French. The program of study was founded on the basis of social justice principals and sustainable partnerships. As such, we work with our partners to address issues of concern within their practice and reality. Each year the student helps work on a project defined and initiated by the organization.

## Objectives

The main objective of the project was to engage our partner institution, Zanmi Lasante, in the ability to critically analyze nursing practice through research. Investigators from low-resource countries face many challenges that hinder such inquiry into clinical problems. These challenges are related to lack of formal education on conducting and understanding research, lack of human resources, lack of access to funding as well as language constraints. In creating an



accompaniment project, through which a nurse leader in the organization could partner with the student researcher during the investigation, we sought to increase the visibility of nursing practice and research in Haiti.

## Background/Context

Haiti's rural population is a historically marginalized group. With over 80% living in abject poverty (less than \$1.25/day) the burden of disease falls heavily on those who do not have access to care or treatment [1-4]. The prevalence of HIV in Haiti is the highest in the Western hemisphere, with a rate of 2.2% that has not seen improvement since 2006 [5]. Women and children are particularly vulnerable, with 75,000 women and 15,000 children under the age of

15 living with HIV [6]. Despite increased efforts to scale up access to HIV services and treatment, rates of vertical transmission of HIV (mother to child) in Haiti have been reported as high as 4.8%. Zanmi Lasante has been providing HIV services to the rural population of Haiti since 1987, yet late entry into prenatal care and difficulties accessing points of care remain a challenge for women and their children.

As such, service delivery is of utmost importance to ensure the right people are being reached for HIV care and treatment. This project served to increase the knowledge of the effectiveness of international protocols in place for the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV as well as to outline the needs of the mother and child population accessing HIV services.

## Activities

This project had two components. The first component involved data collection for a research project investigating the effectiveness of protocol changes on the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV. During this time, I assisted in collecting data from patient charts and registries as well as supervising a team of data collection officers from Zanmi Lasante. Additionally, I conducted statistical analyses during and after the process of data collection. My role consisted of coordinating personnel at each of our study sites as well as the logistics for setting up the data collection protocol. Along with the partner organization, I am also involved in drafting a manuscript with our findings for publication.

The second part of the project carried a clinical emphasis. Within the organization, I participated in health care delivery at the various specialized HIV service sites. We offered HIV and STI screening as well as post-test counselling and counselling for newly diagnosed adults. For patients diagnosed and already enrolled in the HIV care program, we provided physical care including patient assessments and treatment as well as monitoring medication adherence for both adults and children. Mothers and infants being treated at the organization received further education through health promotion activities about breastfeeding and behaviours regarding sexual health.

Additionally, we provided assessments and treatment monitoring for clients being co-treated for tuberculosis. These patients were followed in the community through an “accompagnateur” working program in which members of community report back to the nurses about patients’ ability to adhere to their treatment regimen. The role of the accompagnateur is vital in ensuring patients remain vigilant about their HIV care and treatment. Since the nineties, Zanmi Lasante has been hiring members of the community as accompagnateurs – as people that are trusted by community members. This program has achieved high adherence rates and has been well integrated into Zanmi Lasante’s HIV services. Because of this, it involved constant communication with the workers in the field and logistical management of patients in need of care.

## Challenges and Successes

Working in any low-resource context is sure to be a challenging experience. This is true for both foreign and local workers, as access to medications, equipment, and basic physical necessities remains difficult. One challenge that was particularly salient was the lack of human personnel. Both the clinical and the research component of this project had a large need for workers and I believe that both Zanmi Lasante and I underestimated the capacity of personnel available through the organization. As such, we had difficulties meeting deadlines and tasks. Additionally, each clinical service site was structured differently and we had trouble standardizing protocols across all three sites. Due to lack of personnel and organization at one site, for example, we were simply not able to collect the amount of data we needed in the time that we had. Printing documents for the data collection officers would take days and I became acutely aware of the logistical elements of running a project that I take for granted daily.



One of the most successful elements of the partnership was the inclusion of different members of the organization. At first, the project was limited to a few members who were responsible for overseeing the project. However, once other workers were included in the project and had decision-making capacity and input into the logistics of the project, we were able to achieve our goals much faster. Once all those who were involved had vested interest in the project, they were motivated to work during and off hours. This is an important element of the partnership to ensure the sustainability of future projects.

## Questions Raised

This fellowship allowed me to critically reflect upon the role of North-South power dynamics that result when high-resource countries commit to working relationships with low-resource countries. Working and living in Haiti reminded me of the privilege I experience on a regular basis. I constantly questioned whether my actions further propagated the exploitation experienced by the Haitian population. What I realized the most was the difficulty in achieving an equal partnership. At the end of the day, I knew that I was able to leave to go home and be one of the many people who have come to Haiti for short periods of time and to leave again – not knowing when, or if, I will be able to return. This idea of short-term foreign aid is so prevalent in Haiti and I struggled to understand whether I was meeting the stereotype of a Western worker with no long-term capability of helping to invest in Haiti's future.

## Training and Mentoring

While on site, I received a brief orientation at each location as to the role of each team member and services offered at the site. As previously mentioned, lack of human resources played a large role in the ability to provide me with full orientation to the sites. However, having already had a nursing license, I was comfortable working within the scope of the nursing practice at each site.

My supervisors played a pivotal role not only in guiding me through the investigation process but also in the cultural reflections that were playing out in my head on a day-to-day basis. Fortunately, prior to go to Haiti, my mentor arranged for a weekend long pre-departure workshop that was vital in preparing me for my trip. Through these workshops, we worked out ethical dilemmas and heard about previous students' experiences in similar sites to help sensitize us to the issues we may face. Isolation is a huge risk factor when immersed in a culture that is not one's own, so in addition to this workshop, my mentor hosted bi-weekly Skype sessions that allowed me to talk about my experiences beyond those that I had written about. These debriefing sessions were absolutely necessary as I would often find that I couldn't share my experiences with my Haitian colleagues in the same way. My mentor helped create a safe space through which I was able to express all of my thoughts and emotions. Overall, I felt that my faculty mentor played a pivotal role in my execution of the clinical and research projects as well as my personal learning experience. Because of this, I felt that I had the resources and skills to cope with, and troubleshoot, the day-to-day moments.

## What did you learn?

I learned a great deal about the logistics involved in a partnership. Having to act as a middle person between the realities of the organization in the Haitian context and meeting the requirements of my home institution allowed me to understand the challenges local organizations like Zanmi Lasante face when trying to work with foreign groups who have different needs and interpretations of work capacity requirements. I had the opportunity to reflect on my own pre-judgments and understanding the differences in time management and concept of time, in general, across different cultures. I also learned the importance of being open and asking questions about things that I didn't understand. Instead of staying quiet and making assumptions, I found that engaging my colleagues and peers about the cultural nuances I interpreted opened a forum through which they could talk about the importance of some cultural elements while at the same time helping me understand why some things are the way they are.

I do believe that international internships are crucial in helping expose students to the realities of our global community, especially when the health of other nations is directly related to the policies and actions of our home countries. At the same time, students must commit to their internships with an understanding of the ethical considerations needed when travelling to low-resource countries where communities are vulnerable due to such international policies. While we think we are helping, we may be making things worse and this is a tough pill to swallow when intentions are good. This is why it is so important to have clear expectations and specific, shared interests on both sides of a partnership, and it's something that could have

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been done better in this case. This includes a mandate for the goals of the project as well as everyone's roles and responsibilities. This is particularly important when working with many different people from different places. Role confusion and role uncertainty was certainly a challenge and I believe that in order to work in a team, everyone needs clear direction on what their role is and who to go to when they need help or don't understand something concerning the project or service delivery.

## Community Implications and Further Work

**What was your contribution to the delivery of health and/or social services for poor or marginalized groups?** I have difficulty in assuming that any contribution was made on my behalf to the delivery of health for marginalized groups in Haiti on a day-to-day basis. In fact, I often felt like a burden to the nurses, as I was usually working with one of the only nurses in the clinic at any given time. Taking time to explain and discuss patient cases delayed the care she would normally be able to give on a regular, and busy, day.

I do hope, however, that in working with the organization to help answer their research question I helped provide a platform from which they would be able to interpret and analyze data gathered for prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV to inform their practice. Evidence-based practice is the cornerstone of providing quality care and I believe that having the ability to create and interpret evidence-based practice will be a skill that some of my colleagues will be able to apply more effectively.

### **How might your fellowship make a difference for the people you worked with?**

Zanmi Lasante has played an invaluable role in providing specialized HIV services in the community since 1987. Their presence in Haiti has, and continues to be, vital in the efforts to reduce the burden of disease of HIV. Having knowledge about the effectiveness of protocols in the prevention of mother-to-child transmission will allow Zanmi Lasante to maintain the status of their organization and continue to be the leaders in the prevention of HIV. Additionally, the information from our project will serve to inform national and international policy. As such, the WHO will be able to support the strategies they recommend for countries endemic with HIV dealing with programmatic constraints.

**What would the next steps be to translate your findings into policy action (if not already happening)?** Given that the preliminary results are showing that the protocol changes enacted by the WHO and the Haitian Ministry of Health supports the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV, we are confident that the information will serve to support the great work that is already being done at the clinic and within the country. With this data, we plan to disseminate the findings to the greater scientific community through conferences and publications. We will be applying to the international AIDS conference in July. The manuscript for publication will be worked on both with the McGill and Zanmi Lasante contributors until the end of April 2016.

## Program Evaluation

My ultimate goal as a nurse is to promote awareness of social justice issues in Canada and nurse my patients with a cultural lens. The McBurney fellowship allowed me to expand my knowledge about an important immigrant population in Montreal. Additionally, having the opportunity to work in a country with little to no social security net provided an expanded understanding of the particular social and structural determinants of health. With this knowledge, I hope to work as a community health nurse engaging vulnerable and marginalized populations to have empowerment and help make decisions about their health.

### Any advice for future Fellows?

My advice for future fellows is reflected in my plans for the future. That is, I think it's important for all future candidates to really understand the sociocultural and political history of the country to where they are travelling. Additionally, all roles and responsibilities should be spelled out in a way so that there is no confusion as to who is responsible for what when the fellow is on the ground. For me, this was one of the most important elements that needed to be worked on.

While I was not in the field at the same time of the larger 2015 McBurney Fellow cohort, I was put in touch with the one other fellow on the ground at the time. It was so helpful to hear that she was experiencing very similar issues when it came to the research and health delivery component of the project. Hearing about what strategies were and were not effective providing a coping mechanisms as well as providing more tools to help work through the challenges I was facing on the ground. I would recommend that this element of the fellowship continue going forward.

### Was your project part of a larger/ongoing program? If so, what are the next steps? If not, would you recommend this placement/organization to someone else?

This project will be concluded at the end of the semester but there is certainly more work to be done in the context of HIV service provision. If there were to be clear indication of roles and responsibilities of everyone involved in the project, I would recommend the same placement to another individual. The organization's legacy is a fundamental part in understanding the history of the country and much can be learned by working with Zanmi Lasante.

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