

## PhD student abroad – an ordinary day at the office

As part of my PhD degree programme on HIV, I spent eighteen months in the small, poor West African country of Guinea-Bissau. Since 1978, the Danish research station Bandim Health Project has been located in the capital of the country, Bissau. The research station has mainly conducted studies on non-specific effects of vaccines and the death rate among children, but since 2007, we have been following a cohort of HIV patients at the largest HIV clinic in Guinea-Bissau.

Here is a description of an ordinary day as a PhD student in Guinea-Bissau.

5 am: The cock crows, and the call to prayer is sounded from one of the city mosques. It's hot and I can't sleep, but the generator will not be switched on until 6.30 am, so I have to use a headlight for reading.

6.30 am: I go for a run. I'm joined by a little boy who can easily keep up with me despite the fact that he is wearing shabby plastic sandals. I nearly stumble over a pig on the way.

7.15 am: Unfortunately, there's no running water today, but since I badly need a shower after my run, I pour water over myself from a large bucket.

8.00 am: I get to the HIV clinic. "Kuma ku bu mansi?". "I slept well, thank you". The only language spoken here is the local language creol, which I learnt quite fast. Necessity is the mother of invention. Patients have been queuing up in front of the clinic since dawn to make sure that they are among the few lucky ones to have blood samples taken today. I spend the morning including patients in my study and making sure that a new patient with a very low CD4 count, severe oral candidiasis and possibly tuberculosis is hospitalised. I also have to supervise my local assistants. Unfortunately, I have to tell one of the temporary employees that she will not be working at the HIV clinic in a few months.

2 pm: Staff meeting at the clinic. We discuss problems regarding being late for work, future projects, problems regarding insufficient medicine and, as usual, pay. The people of Guinea-Bissau often seem to have an 'if it works, it works' mentality. This time, it doesn't work. But we maintain the positive atmosphere by ending the meeting sharing a large bowl of rice and fish. We pass around the spoons and spit out fish bones onto the floor.

3 pm: The work day at the hospital is over. I have to drop by the laboratory to relocate blood samples as the temperature in the freezer is too high due to lack of electricity. I spend the rest of the afternoon at the office at Bandim Health Project together with several other Danish PhD and research year students and a large number of local employees. I help a research year student, for whom I'm acting as a supervisor, with some statistical analyses.

5 pm: It's time for our weekly journal club where one of the local medical doctors presents a project dealing with the protective effect that the intake of lime has on cholera.

6.30 pm: I'm off. A couple of researchers from Gambia and Senegal are on visit, so we take them out for grilled giant shrimps at a Portuguese restaurant. I have a much-needed cold beer while we discuss next weekend's trip to southern Guinea-Bissau, where we are going to see chimpanzees.

10.30 pm: I have to check on one of the other Danish students who has developed a fever. Fortunately, the malaria quick test is negative.

11 pm: I get under the mosquito net and try to fall asleep with the fan on before the electricity is switched off at 1 am.

A study abroad period as part of the PhD study programme is highly recommended. No two days are the same, and an ordinary day at the office is never completely ordinary. I have learnt a new language and experienced a new culture, and I have also made a lot of new friends and have become part of an international research environment.

Besides gaining professional and research-related experience, I have also enhanced my leadership skills and my ability to solve problems to a great extent. A study abroad period is developing, both personally and professionally, and you have unique experiences which you would not have had during an ordinary day at the office as a PhD student in Denmark.