

A Lesson in Cross-Cultural Healthcare: Navigating Medical Emergencies Abroad

Keaton Ballard

Student, Florida Gulf Coast University, Fort Myers, FL, USA

Email: klballard1655@eagle.fgcu.edu

Lesley Clack

Professor and Chair, Florida Gulf Coast University, Fort Myers, FL, USA

Email: lclack@fgcu.edu

Tags

Crisis-Management; Cross-Cultural Issues; Education Abroad; Experiential Education; Student Services; University/Higher Education

Setting

This case occurs during a 2-week faculty-led study abroad program in Comparative Healthcare from a United States university to Western Europe. The experiential program travels to Europe every year. In May, a group of 20 undergraduate and graduate students traveled to Paris, France; Geneva and Interlaken, Switzerland; and Milan, Italy to experience healthcare systems outside of the United States. Students visited healthcare facilities, participated in museum tours, and attended lectures by healthcare professionals to compare healthcare systems in Western Europe and the US. Students were given an immersive experience of healthcare systems and the culture in each community to experience how local customs affect healthcare. This case study centers on a student's encounter with the hospital system following a medical emergency in Italy.

Case

One student on the trip faced a major health emergency during the program. The student experienced back pain after falling down two flights of stairs in Paris, France. The pain from this incident continued to progress as the trip continued. Later, while staying at a hostel in Italy, the student twisted over in bed to pass another student a cord and was suddenly frozen by stabbing back pain that left them almost unable to move. It became clear that trying to endure the agony was fruitless and seeking immediate healthcare was necessary. The student notified the program director and was immediately taken to an emergency room (ER) close by in Milan. Once the student reached the hospital, X-rays were taken and it was discovered that the student had an irregular spinal column—an unexpected finding that warranted further investigation. The medical team believed that she had a crooked back causing pinched nerves under her shoulder blade. The hospital staff managed to communicate the severity

of the issue despite the language barrier. The medical team at the emergency room recommended that the student see a physician and have an MRI done upon returning to the United States.

The visit to the Milan hospital offered direct insight into the Italian medical system. Even though there were language barriers, the effectiveness and professionalism of the medical providers spoke volumes. To ensure the student understood the gravity of their condition, medical personnel went to great lengths to explain details using gestures and basic English. This illustrated the adaptability and dedication of the healthcare staff towards delivering necessary treatment even in the face of communication barriers.

The student observed a few cultural differences with how medical processes are handled in Italy versus in the U.S. The Italian healthcare system particularly values the physical environment and complete wellness of an individual. The student felt that Italian hospitals focus on patients' emotional and physical needs whereas the U.S. healthcare system tends to focus on efficiency and medical procedures, at the expense of emotional support and comfort. When comparing Italian and American hospitals, it was noted that the Milanese hospital had a warmer atmosphere, and they take holistic care of patients including considering their comfort and emotional state. They place a high value on ensuring that the patient feels comfortable at all costs, which contrasted the student's experience of U.S. healthcare, where it is sometimes impersonal and rushed, and patient comfort can be overlooked in favor of efficiency.

The recent situation highlighted the importance of having a support network while studying in a country. Going abroad without friends or family can feel daunting, especially if faced with a crisis. The student felt fortunate to have faculty and fellow program participants who offered encouragement and assistance during this period. Not only did the professor ensure that the student received medical attention and assist with communication between hospital staff and the student, but she also remained a constant source of support, offering emotional reassurance throughout the process. Whether it was finding the hospital or communicating with healthcare professionals, this network proved invaluable in navigating the healthcare system.

After returning to the U.S., the student scheduled an MRI as recommended by the doctors in Italy. Arranging the MRI appointment at home shed light on the differences between healthcare systems in both countries. The U.S. experience included calling multiple specialists for a referral, dealing with insurance, and waiting for an appointment that was weeks away. The student noticed how complex the American healthcare system was compared to the patient-focused approach in Italy.

This experience provided lessons for the student and the faculty leader. It emphasized the need for planning before a study abroad program. In case of an emergency, having a grasp of healthcare services, such as knowing where hospitals and clinics are located, can be extremely helpful. Furthermore, being familiar with medical terms in the local language can make seeking medical help much easier. The Italian team demonstrated the expertise and adaptability of healthcare providers in delivering care despite language and cultural challenges. The student appreciated that they were aware and attentive to the needs of their patients.

While no one ever wishes for this experience, the student was able to gain additional insight into the very subject that they were studying - comparative healthcare. The experience of moving from an emergency room in Milan to scheduling an MRI appointment in the US shed light on the complexities and obstacles associated with accessing healthcare. Facing a health issue while studying in Italy gave them insights into the healthcare system, variations in medical practices across cultures, and the significance of having a support system. It emphasized the necessity for students, faculty, and international education programs to be well-informed and ready to navigate healthcare systems abroad.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- How can faculty prepare for dealing with these types of emergencies?
- How can academic institutions help students manage health problems while enrolled in classes abroad?
- How can we prepare students for dealing with language barriers abroad?
- What policies should be put in place to ensure the safety and welfare of students involved in study abroad programs?
- In what ways do cultural differences influence how health and well-being problems are perceived and addressed?
- What contrasts might exist between different countries' health care systems?

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