

Do No Harm: Compassion, Ethics, and Excellence in Global Health Summit

Do global health programs – particularly short-term medical missions and medical supply donation programs – ensure that they are meeting beneficiary and community needs while not creating additional burdens in already under-resourced settings?

That is a question the group of professionals, academics, and students from around the world discussed in May at the Joint Global Summit: Compassion, Ethics, and Excellence in Global Health. The Summit was hosted by The Task Force for Global Health's MedSurplus Alliance ([MSA](#)) and the Catholic Health Association of the United States ([CHA](#)).

MSA developed and oversees an accreditation process for medical surplus recovery organizations (MSROs), which has helped raise standards for medical donation programs. CHA's International Outreach Division provides guidelines and resources for short-term medical missions and international health activities, which often involve the donation of medical supplies.

The two-day event, held at The Task Force's Atlanta headquarters, aimed to further the conversation on how core values guide health professionals in making ethical decisions and creating lasting impact. It brought together an array of [26 speakers and workshop presenters](#) from the ethics, public health, corporate, government, medical missions, and medical supplies sectors.

Event moderator and keynote speaker, David Addiss, MD, MPH, director of The Task Force's Focus Area on Compassion and Ethics (FACE), likened the Summit conference to climbing a mountain with friends and reaching a summit where there would be an understanding of the role that values, ethics, and especially compassion play in global health.

Addiss summed up his presentation with a quote from Gustavo Gutierrez: "Concern for effective action is an expression of love for the other." He noted that the compassionate impulse, which motivates and sustains so much of global health work, when guided by core ethical values, leads to programmatic excellence and quality.

Reflecting on his personal experiences leading short-term medical missions and working in a clinic in Haiti, Bruce Compton, from CHA's International Outreach Division, said that "the shortest route to get somewhere is not always the right route" has been a core value that has guided him through his career, noting that this principle particularly applies to developing guidelines for short-term medical missions.

The principle of "do no harm" also emerged as a key theme during the Summit. Susan Huber, from Ascension Global Mission, described how Ascension Health Systems worked to adopt system-wide strategies, policies, and practices for donating surplus inventory to MSROs that meet certain standards and are accredited by MSA. This helps Ascension extend the service life of their excess inventory while ensuring they address beneficiaries' needs.

The importance of incorporating compassion and individual core values into global health work was further emphasized during a special guest panel with Task Force co-founder Bill Foege, MD, MPH, MedShare co-founder, A.B. Short, and Task Force's Health Systems Strengthening sector head, Patrick O'Carroll, MD, MPH.

Foege and Short, both global health leaders, highlighted a need for humility. Rather than assuming that "anything is better than nothing", people working in global health – particularly in short-term missions and medical supply donation programs – must take the time to learn what communities actually need. Foege closed by saying, "public health work is like a love letter to people who have not been born yet, saying 'we already love you.'"

Melissa Kleine-Bingham, from the World Health Organization's (WHO) Twinning Partnerships for Improvement, started the second day with a global perspective, describing the WHO's efforts to improve the quality of healthcare and health systems worldwide. She also described a new initiative at WHO focusing on compassion as an essential element of quality healthcare.

Anthropologist and freelance humanitarian photographer, Aubrey Graham, PhD, from Emory University, challenged the audience to reflect on the ethical dimensions of photography and images in humanitarian and global health work, and to improve ethical standards for their use. Sharing her experience as a photographer in areas of conflict and crisis, such as eastern Congo, she emphasized the importance of getting to know the people one is photographing – not only for ethics but also for taking photos that accurately reflect their reality.

Shailey Prasad, MBBS, MPH, from the Center for Global Health and Social Responsibility at the University of Minnesota, summarized that people in the global health sector need to continue to ask themselves "why are we doing this?" "We often get lost in the process, logistics, and operations, but *why* we're doing it...is the driver behind it all," he said.

MSA Director Lori Warrens closed the Summit by saying that MSA and CHA wanted to create a space through this event where attendees could be inspired about why they do the work that they do and leave with a better understanding of using their core values to build an ethical framework.

This article only captures a small portion of the Summit's presentations. All presentations and a video recording of the event will be made available [here](#) soon.

Also See

[Program to Improve Quality of Medical Supplies and Equipment Donations Joins The Task Force](#)

Related Links

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