

## Surgeons Overseas Assessment of Surgical Needs (SOSAS) Rwanda: A useful rural health experience for medical students

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**Purpose:** Over 90% of the Rwandan population of 10 million is rural with only 5 physicians and 0.5 surgeons per 100 000 persons. There is one medical school in the country that provides training at three referral hospitals but no rural experience. We employed junior medical students as field interviewers for a nationwide population study. We aim to discuss the educational role of the experience and how it affected student perceptions of healthcare in Rwanda.

**Methods:** In October 2011, 8 medical students and 2 information technology (IT) students were recruited to serve as interviewers for SOSAS Rwanda. Students were responsible for team management, transportation and personal budget, contacting local village leaders, and field data collection, spending up to 1 week at a time in the field. All students who finished the study completed an online evaluation.

**Results:** 7/8 medical students and 2/2 IT students completed the survey. We further analyzed the results of the 7 medical students. All students had prior research experience. Only 29% had lived in a village during the previous 5 years and 43% during the previous 10 years. 100% of students agreed that the research was a useful educational experience, with free responses pointing to a wider understanding of health conditions and barriers to health access at the district level as well as skills acquisition in time management, hard work, public speaking, and problem solving.

**Significance:** In a population with limited access to hospital-based surgical services, community-based experiences can be an important adjunct to medical education.

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