



A Short Course In Wilderness, Remote, & Expedition Medicine Concepts

Lesson 7: International travel As A Medical Provider & Medical Team

GMRS, Ltd.

Global Medical Rescue Services

Wilderness, Expedition, & Remote Medicine, Rescue, & Survival

Global Medical Rescue Services, Ltd. is an international firm based in Belize, Central America. We specialize in the provision of medical, rescue, and survival training and services for extremely remote and difficult environments.

Various aspects of wilderness, remote, expedition, operational, military, humanitarian, disaster, international, and industrial medicine all come into play. Each discipline has information, insight, and experiences that are of benefit to all.

The purpose of this short course is to serve as an introduction to a few of the common aspects and issues that are frequently encountered. Indeed, several of the 8 lessons in the program are directly derived from our teachings, as they are sources of frequent questions and problems for providers.

Our goal is to give you a resource that will be of value to you. Some of you will be familiar with some, perhaps even all of this material. If so, pass it on to others. This program is being distributed to you 'unlocked' so that you may copy, cut, and otherwise pass it around as you desire.

All we ask is that you leave the attributions and authorship statements in place, so that others may contact us if they desire.

The course consists of 7 lessons, which will be sent to you every few days:

- Lesson #1: The Remote Medicine Paradigm
- Lesson #2: Remote Leadership & Followership
- Lesson #3: Physician Medical Direction for Remote Medical Providers
- Lesson #4: Protocols, Standing Orders, & Clinical Guidelines
- Lesson #5: United States Evacuation Protocols
- Lesson #6: United Kingdom & United Nations Evacuation Protocols
- Lesson #7: International Travel As A Medical Provider & Medical Team

Stay safe!

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**A Short Course In
Wilderness, Remote, & Expedition
Medicine Concepts**

**Lesson 7:
International Travel As A Medical Provider
& Medical Team**

Give *very* serious consideration in investing in a local 'fixer' or guide to meet you, or ask your local sponsor/contact to send someone along with status. Arrange this ahead of time and let them know that you are bringing in medical supplies & the approximate weight and size of the containers. They can often work things on their end to make any needed arrangements prior to your arrival. Your embassy in the country normally has a list of reliable people, or shipping agents can normally provide this service as well. And shipping agents normally know which palms to grease and will simply include the cost of that in your fee.

Should you offer a bribe? NO! Never offer it to their face. BUT... if the circumstances seem to allow, such as an informal border post or official in a private office, consider placing a reasonable amount, say \$100 preferably in US currency, in the documents you present to them. Often they will examine them, perhaps leaving the room to get your 'permits' or whatever, and soon you will be on your way. Alternately, they may simply tell you that you do not have a required permit or need to pay a special fee. Then it's bargaining time. Offer to pay it on the spot, get a small amount of cash out – about 25% of their 'fee' – so that they can see it, and start counter-offering. Which means you have to have small amounts of money in several different locations, as you don't want to flash a large roll.

If you have your supplies in your possession, *don't* hand them over, even if you have to take turns sitting on the pile, until you are free to leave with them. If they are in the shipping or customs area, don't leave without them, even if you have to take turns sitting in the supervisor's office. Don't accept 'come back tomorrow' or the equivalent. Be polite, smile, offer small gifts, *never* get angry or give offense. But don't take no for an answer until they turn off the lights & threaten to lock you in for the night. If you have to leave, be back at the office before they are in the morning. Often a single official or clerk will open the office, making it easier (and cheaper) to grease the skids and get your supplies before other show up and want a cut.

You

There are several things to keep in mind regarding presenting yourself as a medical provider.

Look the part. Nice casual clothing – a shirt with a collar, slacks, and non-sneaker shoes goes a long way towards convincing officials you are legit. Even remote border crossing areas respond to clean field clothing, a safari jacket, and mud free boots. Forget the Charles Manson look – clean hair, short or pulled back, and a shave is

very important. A stethoscope is the universal symbol of a medical professional, and one in plain view on the dash, in the very top of your bag, or tucked in your pocket functions as a badge of authority. We once got a pocket medical & survival kit that included large knives and needles through the metal detectors and onto the 'Chunnel' train between London & Paris by being dressed nicely & showing medical ID...

Have medical ID. If possible this will include a photograph and a copy of your license or certification. Most agencies will issue wallet cards. If it doesn't include a photo, put one on the back and laminate it. Have business cards as well identifying you and your organization. Hand them out liberally & always have one in your passport on the ID page so that when it's opened they see it and read it. Have your qualifications spelled out – abbreviations mean little to most people, but 'Paramedic' 'Nurse' or what have you are easily recognized by many.

Have fancy documents to show. Colored letterhead, stamps, seals, embossing, colored inks, and multiple signatures are impressive. Some parts of the world still use wax seals. You may see the border guard holding it upside down, but at least he may be impressed with it. Letters of appointment or introduction, itineraries, and most importantly, letters of possession & transit (discussed below) are best.

Try and keep as many of the 'interesting' medical items you have with you in checked baggage or on the bottom. Anything that turns on & off, has lights, or small parts attracts curiosity. Drugs attract attention. Any medications in your personal gear should have prescription labels attached or obviously be in over the counter packaging. Put a stethoscope on top of medications & scary looking gear.

The Team

All of these same points apply for each individual on the team. Try and travel together as much as possible. Team/firm shirts or jackets create a positive impression, as well as an overwhelming desire by officials to get the entire team out of their hair. Approach officials as a team, quietly, and stand there enmass, with an obvious leader or spokesperson in front. Take a relaxed, quiet manner and don't chatter like morons, but don't stand silently like an undercover military unit either.

Have a clear chain of command and defer to them. They should have all of your travel documents in one large pile, in order of your presentation. They will stand next to the official and call you up in turn.

Put any interesting items in hand luggage at the end of the group... inspectors get board rapidly and get increasingly more cursory as time goes on.

Documents

Every individual should have the documents discussed above. Plus the team or project need the following:

The most important document you can have for your medical supplies and equipment is a letter of 'possession & transit.' This identifies what you have and that you have permission to have it. It should specifically state that the designated individuals listed by name, such as team leaders, "have official permission to possess and transport across international borders the following therapeutic medications and medical supplies in keeping with World Health Organization and United Nations humanitarian medical provision principals." And it should be stamped, sealed, and have every possible official looking letterhead, envelop, etc. Have several in case one gets kept by officials. It is both an inventory and a prescription. It gets you through customs in your destination and when you return home. It needs to be as official as possible, signed by a physician preferably, or health ministry official.

In this document, be very selective about what terms and 'hot-button' words you use. For example, do not use 'morphine' use 'MOS;' for alcohol use ETOH; for HIV use Human ID Retrovirus, and so-on. Use brand names rather than generic names if they are less likely to be recognized & problematic. This prevents officials from picking up on items that are likely to set them off. See the example letter of possession & transport.

The second most important document you need is official permission from the government to enter the country, possess your supplies, and conduct your work. This gets you through immigration. In some cases, such as Iraq, if you are entering as part of a contract held by the Iraqi government or coalition forces you are already given permission by government agreements. In cases such as Thailand, you need official permits for the above. Try and get this documentation to also specify that you are "exempt from all duties, taxes, and customs fees for your humanitarian program."

The third most important document you can have is a complete itinerary with every possible agent, agency, contact, and similar phone numbers you can find.

This should include embassies & consulate numbers for both your country & friendly foreign powers (US, UK, Canada, OZ, NZ, Switzerland, etc.); major hotels & airlines; taxis; shipping agents; international aid agencies; government agencies; military bases; UPS/FedEx/DHL; American Express; Western Union... anyone & everyone you can find a telephone number for...

YOU NEVER KNOW WHO WILL ANSWER THE PHONE OR WHO YOU CAN GET TO HELP YOU WHEN YOU HAVE AN EMERGENCY... we know of people who have gotten help for a heart attack from the FedEx office in India, and various other aid from humanitarian organizations, militaries, and foreign embassies around the world... spend some time on the Internet and build yourself a resource!

Shipping Supplies

Shipping supplies overseas to your area of operation can be problematic at the best of times. You typically have three choices: Forward ship, take with you, and regional/local purchase. All are fraught with difficulties.

Forward shipping often seems the best choice. With adequate pre-planning you can send out heavy & bulky items through an international shipping agent, who will arrange all export/import certificates, duties, and transportation. Ideally, they will also arrange for them to be retrieved from the customs warehouse at your destination and have them delivered to your staging point or in-country transporter.

This is often not as expensive as it sounds, especially when compared to the difficulties these days of transporting materials with you. The problems come in finding a reliable agent on both ends to ensure that your materials arrives when & where you expect, and the ultimate problem of having your shipments looted or stolen outright. You may wish to budget for FedEx, UPS, or DHL shipping of your most critical items. They will almost always arrive when & where expected, intact.

We suggest that you obtain several references for any agent you consider using, especially from your embassy in the destination country, and vet them thoroughly before committing to their services. Inquire about the in-transit security and consider insurance for your materials. Insist on penalties for failure to perform or achieve target dates and locations due to matters within control of the agent. And have a backup plan should some or all of your materials disappear....

It is wise to estimate what you will be consuming or disposing of locally before you return and also make arrangements for return shipping. At the end of a project you are in even less of a mood to drag around your project materials.

Normally shipments will be priced to a bonded customs & delivery agent near you, and you will then pay the local customs charges if any and truck delivery fee to your home. This is typically quite reasonable and much less prone to theft than the inbound leg. We strongly recommend you consider this.

Transporting the majority of your materials with you is always an option. Typically you will be allowed to pay for 1-2 additional suitcase sized containers, but not always. Some airlines allow you to reserve additional containers in advance, others do not. ALL charge ridiculous overweight charges, sometimes as much as \$15 per pound. Add to this the hassle of moving containers through customs, airline changes during layovers when you must take possession of the items and move them yourself, and porter & taxi fees for the containers. After you have moved an entire project in this manner once or twice, you will almost certainly come to the conclusion that you never want to do it again!

We suggest that you hand carry only the most critical or fragile items with you. This will save you an immense amount of grief, questions at customs, and give you a chance to arrive at your destination much more relaxed and rested.

Local/regional purchase is an option that many novices overlook. Remote international sites seem just that – remote – and the assumption is that you cannot possibly obtain what you need, in quality or quantity.

In fact, countries such as Argentina, Belize, India, Jordan, Mexico, Morocco, Pakistan, South Africa, Thailand, and Vietnam all have excellent quality local manufacturers & suppliers and are quite familiar with shipping materials throughout their respective regions. The key again is to obtain references to reliable agents and make contact early to ensure that your needs are understood *exactly*, your price is fixed in writing, and payment is made. A local agent is again invaluable, as they may conduct the negotiations and monitor progress in person.

Containers are another area of concern for projects. In general, avoid cardboard boxes at all costs! Give consideration to what you will do with the containers at your destination. Will you:

- Repack your supplies into other containers?
- Use your shipping containers as your project transport & storage?
- Leave the containers in storage and re-use them when you return home?
- Re-sell the containers at your destination?
- Do you have very fragile or critical instruments that require special protection?

Some options to consider, their pluses and minuses:

Soft side expedition grade duffels, e.g. North Face. True expedition grade duffels with rubberized fabric & industrial zippers are the de facto standard for most projects. They are available with or without wheels – we favor with for most applications – these are in-line skate type wheels with bearings, not the poor quality wheels found on standard luggage, and will handle some amazingly poor terrain:

- These are expensive, and worth it
- They can be looted easily by cutting away the zipper
- They stack & pack relatively well

Hard side luggage & cases:

- These are rugged and long lived.
- They are harder to loot
- They stack & pack relatively well, but lack ‘squishability’
- They are heavy & expensive.

Ultra protective ‘Pelican’ type water & crush proof cases:

- These are the best choice for critical and fragile items, they are nearly indestructible.

Storage boxes e.g. Rubbermaid type:

- These are inexpensive and light weight.
- They cannot effectively be locked, but can be heavily secured with tape.
- They stack & pack well.
- They are surprisingly flimsy and subject to damage. The corners in particular tend to take a beating and crack or even break away. If you use these, we suggest you ‘pick your battles’ and use them for airline shipments and other more controlled environments. Also, reinforce the corners inside & out with duct tape

Shipping barrels/drums of 10-30 gallon size, often surplus from shipping food products such as mushrooms, with cinch-down lids:

- Either cylinder or a true barrel shape, these are nearly indestructible, light weight, and inexpensive if you find used ones
- The cinch-down rims provide a nearly waterproof seal and can usually be padlocked
- They can be tightly packed with soft side containers and fragile items can be center packed
- They stack & pack reasonably well
- They are commonly used commercial containers and are less likely to attract attention vs. ‘expedition’ containers.
- They can be marked, spray painted, and other wise tagged for easy ID of contents.
- They can usually be re-sold easily at your destination.

When giving consideration to supply movement, we suggest that you develop a decision matrix based on your needs, budget, and time frame for planning, something like this:

Personal – wheeled soft duffel – goes with you

Team Critical – hard side luggage or Pelican type – goes with you

Team Primary Bulk – shipping barrels – forward ship

Team Secondary Bulk – local regional purchase – shipping barrels & sent to staging point

Back up plan – local or regional supplier – on standby should they be needed for replacement of items

Do you have some great tips, tricks, and hits for international travel as a medical provider? Please share them with us, and we will include them in the next addition!

Looking for training wilderness, remote, and expedition medicine, rescue, and survival? How about expeditions to some of the wildest places on earth?

Come visit us right now at www.gmrsltd.com and see what we have on the schedule... make sure you sign up for our newsletter, if you haven't ... contribute to our blog... and wherever your travels take you...

STAY SAFE!

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IMA-ALF Foundation

International Medical Association of ALF's

Africa – Antarctica – Asia – Middle East – New Jersey

TO: Officials & Law Enforcement Officers
FROM: Dr. Sillius Soddus FCS, FRSCRS
RE: Official Permission to Possess & Transport Medications & Medical Supplies

In order to complete the fully approved “K-69 Village STD Project” scheduled for May through August, 2005, in Itburns Province, the following Team Leaders:

- Ms. Jamie Swallows, Registered Nurse
- Mr. Todd Blowme, Physician Assistant
- Mr. Ea T'me, Student Physician

Have Official Permission to possess and transport across international borders the following therapeutic medications and medical supplies in keeping with World Health Organization and United Nations humanitarian medical provision principals:

- Bicillin 1.2 Million Unit Syringe # 250
- Rocephin 1 gm bottle # 250
- Zithromax 250 mg #2000
- Tadalafil 20 mg, #500
- Syringes #500
- Needles # 500
- ETOH pads # 1000
- Medical gloves, assorted sizes, #12 boxes
- Human ID Retrovirus test kits #500
- And related supplies and teaching aids

Please contact me directly for any questions. Thank you for assisting this worthwhile endeavor.

Sincerely,

Dr. Sillius Soddus, FCS (US), FRSCRS (UK)
Chief Medical Officer
IMA-ALF Foundation