

Helping Expats Get Ready for a

Healthy Assignment

PART 1

By Dr. Frank Gillingham, HTH Worldwide

Of the many goals that expatriates, accompanying family members and employers have for an international assignment, none is more important than having a safe and healthy experience both abroad and upon repatriation. In fact, the success of an entire assignment may depend on the health of the employee and family.

As with any business objective, the key is careful preparation.

HR and benefits professionals should encourage expatriates to spend time on careful, health-oriented preparation before leaving home and provide the necessary tools before and during the assignment. The practical points discussed in this two-part article allow the well-prepared expatriate to avoid considerable anxiety and frustration when the inevitable illness strikes. Part one focuses on finding a primary physician, vaccinations and prescription

QUICK LOOK

- ⇒ Establishing a comfortable relationship with a primary care physician in the host country is absolutely critical to a successful assignment.
- ⇒ It is important to remind assignees that some vaccines require time to take effect.
- ⇒ Blood pressure pills, antibiotics, birth control pills and other prescription medications are available under different names in different countries.



It is important to encourage expatriates to make the selection and schedule an **introductory appointment** while on a preassignment trip. These visits are crucial and more likely to occur if scheduled before the actual assignment begins.

do's and don'ts. In next month's *workspan*, part two covers the needs of the expatriate's family, foreign medical terminology, hospital information and tips for emergency situations or serious illness.

Home Visits with a Primary Physician

Just as a tuneup for the family car is a good idea prior to a cross-country road trip, expatriates and their families should visit their primary care physician before going abroad. Remind them to ask whether all routine screening tests (e.g., cholesterol, colonoscopy, pap test, mammogram), which would normally be performed during the assignment, can instead be performed in advance. It might be helpful to confirm whether the primary doctor is willing to consult from time to time while the family is abroad, clearly explaining that the expatriate would not call for emergency situations but only for comment on whether a treatment plan sounds reasonable.

Reinforce the need to obtain medical records, along with a short letter recounting any past medical history and current problems, including treatment. Unfortunately, many expatriates forget this important point.

While photocopies are better than nothing, they can be hard to read;

duplicates of important diagnostic tests (e.g., electrocardiograms, mammograms) are better. If possible, the expatriate should bring two copies of everything: one for the family records (which should not be surrendered at any time due to the difficulty of obtaining new originals while abroad), and one copy for the new primary care physician. Another option is entering a personal medical history on the Web using an online service, allowing data availability through a Web browser.

The Search for a Foreign Physician

Establishing a comfortable relationship with a primary care physician in the host country is absolutely critical to a successful assignment. HR managers can help expatriates find a new physician overseas through knowledgeable resources or colleagues' references in the host country. Expatriates should review as much information as possible, including the doctor's medical education, board certification status, special interests and so forth. One HTH surgeon in São Paulo, Brazil, suggests making sure the physician is accredited by the local hospital.

It is important to encourage expatriates to make the selection and schedule an introductory appointment while on a *preassignment* trip. These visits

are crucial and more likely to occur if scheduled before the actual assignment begins. Newcomers should go to the doctor upon arrival, before they have any illness, to become acquainted, and acquire confidence when judgment is not impaired by sudden illness, recommends one medical expert. Consequently, if the first visit is unsuccessful, there is still time to select a new physician. Switching is much more difficult once evaluation and treatment have begun.

As patient-physician relationships are very personal, the family should decide on the initial visit how comfortable each member is with the doctor's "bedside manner" and facility with the family's native language. For example, a physician in Tokyo reported, "Most Japanese doctors do not appreciate comments and ideas from their patients but expect a lot of respect and esteem ... Many Japanese doctors who mention that they speak English do not speak fluent or decent English, especially when it comes to daily conversation." If the family feels comfortable, it should leave behind a copy of its medical records.

An important point to ask is how the physician should be reached after hours; expatriates and their family members should keep the doctor's home telephone number, cell phone and pager number with them all the time. Why? In Korea, for example, the family physician who

is able to speak the family's native language will make arrangements for specialist and emergency-room visits. One final point the expatriate might not consider is billing procedures. Cash payment is generally required in some countries, such as Italy, and the expatriate should bring cash on the first visit, just in case.

Health Risks and Vaccinations

Is the water safe to drink? Do malaria and yellow fever occur? Expatriates should be aware of the risks associated with their primary host country and other cities in the region to which they might travel frequently. HR professionals should provide assignees with information resources (e.g., HTH Worldwide, www.hthworldwide.com, the Centers for Disease Control, www.cdc.gov), along with a list of qualified travel-medicine physicians and/or clinics from which they can obtain the appropriate vaccinations. This is critical for the expatriate's family as well. (See "If the Expatriate Has Children".)

It is important not only to remind assignees that some vaccines require time to take effect (or need several injections over a few months), but also to confirm that standard vaccinations (e.g., diphtheria/tetanus) are up to date. When the host location is

geographically remote or the required vaccination complex, the expatriate might be best served by a consultation with a travel medicine specialist.

Translating Prescription Names


Blood pressure pills, antibiotics, birth control pills and other prescription medications are available under different names in different countries. If possible, expatriates should determine the commercial name of any past and present medication using a drug information guide. They should also learn the generic (chemical) names, which are more likely to be familiar to physicians and pharmacists. Those requiring allergy injections should get a letter from the physician describing the exact components of the shots.

Recommend that expatriates carry an adequate supply of all their medications (at least six months' worth) in case there is a delay in finding an equivalent supply. And they should pack half this amount in a carry-on bag. Since oral contraceptives are particularly difficult to duplicate, expatriates might consider supplying themselves from home during their entire stay abroad. Pharmacy plan limitations may make it problematic to obtain these medications without significant out-of-pocket cost, a dilemma that HR should

discuss with the employee. Suggest to expatriates that they bring along their glasses (and an extra pair) and contact lens prescriptions, with disposable contacts supplied from home.

Conclusion

HR professionals need to be educated on how to assist expatriates to ensure their and their family's health, thereby ensuring the future of the company's investment in talent. By providing expatriates with the information contained in this series of articles, HR professionals can help them get off to a healthy start.

Read next month's *workspan* for the continuation of this article with more must-know information for expatriates. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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If the Expatriate Has Children

Expatriate life with children requires special preparation:

- Schedule well-child visits prior to leaving, and obtain copies of growth charts and medical records.
- Bring a book on common childhood illnesses.
- Become knowledgeable about vaccination requirements, which vary by country (the child might not be admitted to school in the host country, nor admitted to home-country schools upon repatriation if the vaccinations are not up to date according to country standards). Consider accelerating vaccinations before moving, obtain a recommended vaccination schedule for the time overseas and discuss home-host differences with the physician.