

# VSO

## Giving something back

Fiona MacRae worked as a VSO pharmacist in North West Tanzania from September 1995 to September 1997. She is a teacher-practitioner at the University of Strathclyde and is principal pharmacist in education, research and development for Lothian Hospitals. She recently held a national pharmacy audit position for the Scottish Department of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society

**F**or many years I turned the page when the phrase “Overworked, underpaid and the best job in the world,” caught my eye in the job section of The Pharmaceutical Journal. I didn’t want to think too deeply about leaving friends, family and a good job for two years. I also doubted whether I had any useful skills to offer a developing country.

Looking back, I don’t know what made me apply to VSO, but I am glad I took the plunge. I can still remember struggling onto the plane heading for Tanzania, my rucksack laden with textbooks instead of clothes, scared to death of being asked to perform pharmaceutical miracles in my new job. Little did I know I had much to learn from my patient, experienced Tanzanian colleagues.

During my time with VSO, I was involved with on-the-job training of non-pharmaceutically qualified colleagues responsible for the day to day running of two small hospital pharmacy departments. Their expectations of me were low, but slowly we worked together to improve the basics of drug ordering, storage, dispensing and counselling. In each posting my job changed to meet demands. I found myself teaching pharmacology to nursing students, running weekly drug-related slots in the doctors’ meetings and visiting the wards

to develop procedures for the safe administration and recording of medicines.

Many pharmacists say they would love to do VSO but worry they don’t have anything to offer, or that two years overseas will leave them out of date and unemployable. I believe that everyone with a United Kingdom pharmacy qualification and two years work experience has something to offer. Keeping up to date is up to you, but, with the support of UK colleagues and your VSO-maintained subscription to The Pharmaceutical Journal, is not impossible. Dare I say you even develop new skills? I gained management and teaching experience I would not have gained at a similar stage in my UK career. I also believe I wouldn’t have had the confidence to apply for my current post, if not for my VSO experience. My two years in Tanzania have been the most personally and professionally rewarding of my life to date. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to live and work alongside Tanzanian colleagues who treated me as a respected colleague and welcome friend. ✕

For more information on VSO write to VSO, 317 Putney Bridge Road, Putney, London SW15 2PH or check out the website at [www.vso.org.uk](http://www.vso.org.uk).