

**MAKERERE**



**UNIVERSITY**

**COLLEGE OF HEALTH SCIENCES**

**SCHOOL OF MEDICINE**

**INTERNATIONAL ELECTIVES REPORT**

Name: Kukunda Pavin

Home Institution: Makerere University College of Health Sciences

Host Institution: Des Moines University, Iowa, USA

Clinical Site: Des Moines University Clinic – Family Medicine Department

Dates: June 9th – July 3rd, 2025

Program Type: International Clinical Observership (Elective)

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# Acknowledgments

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At Des Moines University Clinic, I was privileged to be welcomed into the Family Medicine Department by an extraordinary team. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Seth Quam, Dr. Jonathan Crosbie, Dr. Sarah Parrott, Dr. Jolene Marie Givant, and Dr. April for their patience, mentorship, and willingness to share knowledge at every opportunity. I also appreciate Megan Johnson for her kindness in hosting us and including us in her family's 4th of July celebrations, and Prof. Nora Stelter for her nurturing guidance throughout our stay.

To my elective partner, Joy Serunjogi, I extend a special thank you for being not just a colleague but a sister and friend. Her companionship enriched every part of this journey.

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## Introduction

Being selected for the international elective at Des Moines University was both an honor and a transformative milestone in my medical training. The opportunity to step into a new healthcare system, far from the familiar routines of home, challenged me to think differently about patient care and the role of family medicine in promoting health across all ages.

This elective offered a deep dive into outpatient family medicine, a specialty that, in Uganda, we typically experience through lectures rather than clinical rotations. Over four weeks, I gained insight into preventive care, chronic disease management, osteopathic manual medicine, and the interpersonal relationships that underpin effective

family practice. Beyond the clinic, this journey exposed me to new cultures, broadened my worldview, and strengthened my resolve to bring some of these lessons back to Uganda.

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## **Selection and Preparation**

When the International Office announced opportunities for clinical electives abroad, I knew immediately that I wanted to apply. I carefully prepared my CV, application letter, and supporting recommendations, and after a competitive selection process and interviews, I was matched to Des Moines University.

Preparation for the trip was both exciting and intense. The Makerere International Office provided UGX 1,120,000 in support, which covered my visa fee of UGX 703,000 and part of my vaccination costs, which included a Tdap shot (UGX 230,000), two doses of MMR (UGX 80,000 each), and a flu shot (UGX 80,000). I also obtained travel insurance at my own expense of UGX 367,800 which the university is going to refund and purchased appropriate official clothing and professional attire suitable for the Midwestern climate.

We received a virtual orientation from Dr. Keyah Levy and the Global Health Office at DMU, which emphasized professionalism, cultural sensitivity, and tips for making the most of our clinical time. This session, coupled with my own research into U.S. healthcare, helped me step into the experience prepared to learn and adapt.

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## **Travel and Arrival**

I departed Entebbe International Airport on June 3rd aboard Turkish Airlines, arriving in Des Moines later that same evening. Accommodation was arranged at Grandview

University, where I stayed in a spacious four-bedroom apartment with my own bedroom, a fully equipped kitchen, and comfortable communal spaces.

From the moment we landed, we were supported by Julia, a DMU student assigned to help us settle in. She picked us up from the airport, guided us through our first week, and personally took us for our orientation at the new DMU campus. Her reliability and generosity made those initial days far less overwhelming, and her willingness to assist whenever we encountered challenges was a true gift.

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## **About Des Moines University**

Des Moines University, founded in 1898, is a leading institution in graduate medical and health sciences education. Its programs in osteopathic medicine, physician assistant studies, podiatric medicine, public health, and biomedical sciences are complemented by advanced simulation facilities, telemedicine resources, and a strong emphasis on interprofessional collaboration.

The Family Medicine Department, where I was placed, embodies the principles of holistic, preventive, and patient-centered care, integrating Osteopathic Manual Medicine (OMM) to address musculoskeletal concerns alongside conventional treatment.

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## **Objectives of the Elective**

My goals for the elective were to understand the scope of family medicine in the U.S., observe the management of chronic diseases, experience the application of OMM, learn to navigate electronic health record systems, and appreciate how continuity of care is cultivated in an outpatient setting. I also aimed to compare these approaches with the Ugandan healthcare system, identifying strategies that could be adapted to improve patient care back home.

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## Clinical Learning Experience

My days began with a 6:50 am bus ride, arriving at the clinic in time for the first patients at 8:00 am. Depending on the day's schedule and the physician I was assigned to, we would see between 12 and 18 patients, ranging from routine follow-ups to acute presentations.

One of the most striking aspects of the rotation was the emphasis on chronic disease management. I observed patients with diabetes who were being treated with GLP-1 medications, a therapy I had only read about before, often coupled with detailed advice on exercise, diet, and daily glucose monitoring. Hypertensive patients were managed with carefully tailored multi-drug regimens, including ACE inhibitors and diuretics, and were encouraged to keep home blood pressure logs to share at follow-up visits. I also saw patients with obesity being supported through medication, counseling, and structured lifestyle changes.

Mental health was an integral part of family medicine here. Patients with depression and anxiety were reviewed regularly, with conversations that extended beyond symptoms to include their work, social life, and personal wellbeing. This holistic approach was reinforced by the strong relationships the physicians maintained with their patients—relationships built on trust, empathy, and continuity of care.

I also had the unique opportunity to spend a day with Dr. Johnson, an OMM specialist, who introduced me to the principles of osteopathic manual therapy. Under her supervision, and with patient consent, I practiced basic techniques to relieve musculoskeletal discomfort. This was a highlight of my clinical learning.

The patient mix was diverse. While chronic cases dominated, there were occasional acute presentations—chest pain, cough and flu, ear infections, knee and hip pain—that were promptly assessed and managed, sometimes with medication, other times with physiotherapy referrals. Preventive care was a constant, with children receiving routine

vaccinations and adults being brought up to date with immunizations such as influenza, Tdap, shingles, and pneumococcal vaccines.

Learning also extended to systems and technology. Early in the rotation, Dr. April and Dr. Quam introduced me to **Athena**, the electronic health record system used at the clinic. I was impressed by how seamlessly it connected information from other hospitals, clinics, and radiology centers to the primary care record, ensuring continuity and efficiency in patient management.

Occasionally, I was invited to take vital signs and assist with physical examinations, which allowed me to maintain my clinical skills while observing a different healthcare context.

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## Lessons Learned and Reflections

This elective reinforced the value of patient-centered care, where medical decisions are informed by a patient's social, emotional, and physical context. It demonstrated how structured follow-up and continuity of care can significantly improve outcomes for chronic illnesses.

I saw firsthand the benefits of integrated electronic medical records, which reduce duplication, prevent errors, and save time—a lesson I believe could transform patient care in Uganda if implemented effectively. I also came to appreciate the preventive approach in family medicine, where counseling, screening, and vaccination are treated as essential, not optional.

The teamwork within the clinic was remarkable. Physicians, nurses, and allied health staff worked in synchrony, supported one another, and placed the patient's wellbeing at the center of all decisions. This culture of mutual respect and collaboration is something I will strive to foster in my future practice.

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## Cultural and Social Experiences

Life outside the clinic was just as enriching. We visited the Des Moines Botanical Gardens, a tranquil escape filled with vibrant plant life and carefully designed landscapes. The Iowa State Capitol offered a glimpse into local history, with its grand architecture and richly decorated chambers.

One weekend, Dr. Jolene Givant hosted us at her lake house, where the peaceful surroundings and warm hospitality offered a welcome contrast to the busy clinic days. We also attended baseball games, enjoyed local eateries—including the quirky Zombie's Restaurant—and celebrated the 4th of July with Megan Johnson's family, complete with fireworks and classic American barbecue.

These moments deepened my understanding of American culture and created lasting memories alongside new friends.

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## Connections and Relationships

The elective provided opportunities to connect with a variety of people. I built friendships with fellow international students, Bruno from Brazil and Laura from Colombia, who shared in the challenges and joys of adapting to a new environment. Clinic staff, including certified medical assistants Judy and Stacy, welcomed me warmly and were always willing to answer questions.

The physicians I worked with were not only teachers but mentors, offering advice on career development and insights into the U.S. residency system. These relationships have expanded my professional network and inspired me to maintain global connections in my future career.

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## Challenges and Limitations

While the experience was overwhelmingly positive, there were some challenges. The local bus system occasionally caused delays, and jet lag made the first week particularly tiring. Limited interaction with DMU students, who were based on a separate campus, meant fewer opportunities for peer learning than I had hoped. Financial constraints also limited my ability to explore further afield during my stay.

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## Suggestions for Improving the Exchange Program

I believe future participants would benefit from having a local peer mentor to ease the adjustment process, as well as accommodation closer to the clinical site to reduce commute times. Timely disbursement of financial support before departure would help with preparation, and a more structured clinical orientation could make the first week more productive.

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## Conclusion

My elective at Des Moines University was a defining chapter in my medical education. It expanded my clinical knowledge, honed my observational skills, and deepened my appreciation for holistic, patient-centered care. The cultural experiences enriched my worldview, and the professional connections I made will continue to influence my career path.

I return to Uganda inspired to integrate the best of what I observed—continuity of care, preventive medicine, and collaborative teamwork—into my own practice, and to share these lessons with my peers.

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*Figure 1; A photo at the Des Moines University Clinic*



*Figure 2; A photo at the Des Moines University Clinic*





*Figure 3; A photo of Joy and I at the clinic signpost*



*Figure 4; A photo of Dr. Jolene Marie Givant and I on my last day of rotation.*





*Figure 5; A photo of me and two of the Certified Medical Assistants (CMA) that I worked with, Judy (right) and Stacy (left)*



Figure 6; A photo of Dr. Sarah Parrott and I





Figure 7; A photo of Dr. Jill Johnson, a D.O at DMU Clinic and I



*Figure 8; Dr. Sarah Parrott (left) and Megan Johnson (right) and I on my last day of rotation.*



Figure 9; A visit to the new DMU campus.





*Figure 10; A photo of Joy, Laura, Bruno and I at the new DMU Campus*



*Figure 11; Prof. Norah Stelter (far right) took Joy and I for free dental appointments at Lush Dental in West Des Moines.*



*Figure 12; Dr. Sarah Parrott at dinner with Laura, Bruno, Joy and I*



*Figure 14; Joy and I at the Beautiful Botanical Garden*

*Figure 15; Hanging out with the other exchange students, Laura and Bruno in Downtown Des Moines*



*Figure 16; A weekend spent at Dr. Jolene's Lake house with Laura and Joy*

