An Enterprising Approach to Funding Health for the World's Poor

A Spotlight on Liz Charles, Duke University

Innovators Connecting to *Accelerate* Global Development

The Story

The Social Entrepreneurship Accelerator at Duke (SEAD), one of eight Development Labs funded by USAID's Higher Education Solutions Network, works around the world with innovators who have found entrepreneurial ways to improve access to health care. Often, SEAD's representatives promote the concept of social entrepreneurship itself.

That was the case with Liz Charles, an MBA student at Duke University who was supported by SEAD in traveling in summer 2013 to the Switzerland headquarters of the World Health Organization (WHO), an institution not usually associated with innovation. The official purpose of Charles' internship was to assess how the organization's many departments determined their research priorities. Her observations will be vital to the WHO as it encourages more research into overlooked diseases that primarily affect people in developing countries.

As it happened, staff members in the WHO's Department of Tropical Disease Research were interested in social entrepreneurship as a way to overcome the limitations of governmental health funding. They met Charles, who was able to connect them with SEAD and offered to help flesh out the idea. Charles advised the department on a proposal to research how social entrepreneurship could combat infectious diseases common in low-income communities. "A lot of programs lack sustainability," Charles explained. "Donors create programs, but once they leave, the programs fail to continue." The proposal included the novel element of pairing an intern from a low-income country with an intern from a high-income country and having them research together in both countries.

Among its many activities in support of innovation in global health, the Social Entrepreneurship Accelerator at Duke (SEAD) sent researcher Liz Charles, upper left, to help colleagues at the World Health Organization prioritize research needs related to innovation, intellectual property, and trade.

Photo courtesy of Liz Charles.

The proposal was well received: The WHO approved a two-year project to research how "social business" can prevent and control infectious diseases stemming from poverty, culminating in an international conference in late 2014 to set priorities. Charles was brought on board as a consultant to help launch the project. "The output of this research may be useful in setting research agendas, affecting donor funding, steering national policy, and encouraging research and product development," Charles added.

Working at the global level is satisfying for Charles, who originally trained as a nurse and was frustrated by what she saw of systemic-level problems. "I felt like there was a need for some management skills in the area of public health," she said.

Duke has a strong focus on global health across multiple departments, and SEAD's emphasis on supporting innovation was a draw for Charles. "I wanted to apply both my knowledge of medicine and the business skills that I was developing," Charles said. "I'm a very creative person. Social entrepreneurship brings that together – empowering people with innovative and creative minds to create change in global health. SEAD was a natural match."

"I want to make sure that I'm using my skills and my intellect to leave the world a better place than I found it, and maybe have an impact in improving people's lives."

Charles wrote about her SEAD-supported work at the WHO on SEAD's website: http://goo.gl/YJA4Au and http://goo.gl/vOQ5OZ.