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Making the Decision to Travel

Alicia Oberquell
Traveling PTA, MDI Medical

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Prior to joining the ranks of traveling therapists and PT assistants, I worked for about seven years in various settings, including an outpatient sports rehab clinic and a skilled nursing unit. During my seventh year, I met a traveling therapist who was especially enthusiastic about his career and the benefits traveling offered. At the time, I had just purchased a home and preferred to stay put. Soon after, I met the man again, but this time, for some reason, my interest was piqued. I wondered when else in life I would have the opportunity to fully experience many sights and cultures of the country, while earning an enticing salary. Serendipitously, a recruiter called the office while the front desk staff was away, so I answered the phone. Two months later, I arrived at my first assignment and figured I'd give it one year.

That was three years, four states and many exciting experiences ago.

Journey Thus Far

So far, my personal and professional experiences have been rich with new knowledge and relationships. I've taken assignments in Washington, Massachusetts, Tennessee and Arizona – all places I would not have otherwise had the opportunity to see, much less live. I have met some amazing people, experienced several unique cultures within the country and certainly not least, gained significant clinical experience and confidence.

Specifically, I have solidified my experience in skilled nursing rehab and gained new skills in acute and traumatic brain injury (TBI) rehabilitation. Beyond learning new broad skills in these settings, traveling has allowed me to treat a wide variety of patients whose treatment needs required me to learn specialized treatment techniques and new modalities. To put it as simply as possible, my therapeutic knowledge base has grown considerably because I have been exposed to numerous ways of doing many different things.

In addition to new clinical skills, my experience as a traveling PT assistant has taught me invaluable interpersonal skills. Traveling essentially forces a person to walk into a clinic or other therapeutic setting and blend in as if they have worked there for two years. Therefore, I have learned to adapt to new personalities and environments, assimilating with ease to each one.

Working as a traveling PT assistant has another distinct advantage, which is excellent overall compensation. In addition to a higher hourly wage than an equivalent traditional position would pay, traveling PT assistants earn a per diem stipend for housing, food and transportation. My current contracting company offers me the choice of selecting and arranging my own housing, or having them take care of it for me. I've chosen to let the company make housing arrangements, and each time, the result has been excellent – the housing allowance varies by geography, and it's always sufficient to yield attractive, fully-furnished housing. I am also fortunate to receive health insurance and retirement benefits.

What It Takes

The most valuable tools a traveling PT assistant needs are flexibility and an open mind. This kind of career demands a person who is somewhat outgoing and unafraid to jump right in and contribute upon arrival. Sometimes I receive a day of training before a new assignment, and sometimes I am lucky to get a tour of the building. Of course, I am always provided with a tour of the clinic and clear instructions regarding patient flow and administrative requirements. By continuously changing assignments, I have learned to be more confident in my skills and myself.

A perfect example of this concept in action happened on my second assignment, which took place in a treatment setting for traumatic brain injury patients. Although I had wholeheartedly agreed to take the

assignment, I was a bit unsure of myself because I had limited experience in that area. Within two weeks, I got the hang of it and was seeing my patients recover. One young woman stands out as a special inspiration. She had been in a motor vehicle accident and came to us with limited function, and unable to walk. Through our sessions, I watched her recover and eventually leave the facility on her own two feet. It was a proud moment for her, I'm sure, and I felt privileged to be a part of her recovery.

Drawbacks

As with any career, traveling is not perfect – but it's close. It seems like each potential drawback is actually a benefit. For example, the logistics of traveling, even when housing is set up in advance, can be taxing. On the other hand, arriving at my new location is always exhilarating.

In the beginning of my traveling career, some colleagues were offering advice and tips. One piece of advice was to prepare for other therapists and PT assistants to act unfriendly. Apparently some people are resentful of the benefits travelers receive. In three years, I have only encountered such an attitude once, and frankly, I ignored it. The vast majority of coworkers are relieved to have additional help and therefore welcome travelers openly.

What to Ask

PT assistants considering traveling therapy should first talk to other travelers to find a reputable staffing firm and recruiter. For me, recruiters are the most valuable piece of the puzzle. The recruiters I have most appreciated share a few key qualities: they listen carefully to figure out the type of experience I'm looking for, and then meet or exceed those expectations. A good recruiter will get to know you, call to check on you during the assignment and can even proactively present opportunities.

It is important to ask questions before accepting a contract. Questions to ask include:

1. Where are your company's positions located?
2. Will I be restricted to certain settings?
3. What is the compensation package?
4. How does your company handle housing arrangements?
5. Does your company offer benefits?
6. What happens if I don't like the assignment once I get there?
7. What is your company's percentage rate of placing people where they want to be?

Overall Impression

When I took my first assignment, I thought I would travel for a year – maximum. I took a bit of a leap of faith, but three years later, I am still enjoying my career immensely. Traveling has offered me rich personal and professional experiences that will last a lifetime. I highly encourage open minded professionals interested in advancing their skills, experiencing some adventure, and benefiting from a well paying career to consider traveling.

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Founded in 1988, MDI has recorded 18 consecutive years of profitable growth, and expects to achieve \$80 million in revenues in 2007. MDI now employs over 700 people nationally out of offices in Atlanta, GA (HQ); Birmingham, AL; Columbus, GA; Dallas, TX; Greenville, SC; Phoenix, AZ; and Seattle, WA.

For more information contact:

Brad Mencher
Vice President, MDI
1-888-416-7949
bmencher@mdigroup.com
www.mdigroup.com

