

# Healthcare

**Ensuring that the quality of care globally mobile populations have access to and receive is critical to their overall health and wellbeing. In this interview, Dr Shoba Subramanian of UnitedHealthcare Global offers a unique, hands-on clinical insight into the value of global medical treatments and assistance as well as trends that are redefining the future of healthcare delivery.**

## **Tell us about your background and training in the medical sector and how your career has progressed to its current stage**

I initially chose family medicine because it provided me with a comprehensive knowledge base and the opportunity to serve the community. During my training, I had the privilege of treating patients from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Subsequently, I was honoured to receive a global health fellowship with the Maddox Jolie-Pitt Foundation in Cambodia, where I implemented health programmes in rural areas.

Following this experience, I joined a prominent assistance company where I coordinated medical evacuations and repatriations while also serving as a flight doctor. Leveraging my skills and experience in rural healthcare, I then took on the role of a remote topside doctor for the oil and gas sector.

Aspiring to be part of a larger organisation, I joined UnitedHealthcare Global in 2017. My dedication to improving safety standards in medical transportation earned me a company award, leading to my promotion to medical director in 2019. Today, I provide support to the Global Insurance and Assistance sectors, contributing to the wellbeing of individuals worldwide.

## **What attracted you to the field of tropical medicine?**

I was drawn to tropical medicine because I wanted to expand my understanding of managing diseases that affect globally mobile populations, particularly malaria. I had encountered numerous cases and found it particularly challenging to address in an offshore environment.

Motivated by this, I enrolled in the Global Health and Humanitarian Medicine course offered by Médecins Sans Frontières. This course provided me with comprehensive

knowledge of various diseases and healthcare issues, including the management of conditions like HIV and tuberculosis. It also equipped me with practical tools for microbial recognition and fundamental microscopy skills. Little did I know the modules on outbreak management and population health monitoring would prove invaluable during the pandemic. Overall, my training has prepared me to develop effective strategies for managing communicable diseases in challenging environments, which directly applies to my day-to-day work.

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## **Travel health is a unique sector of the medical discipline; what makes it different from other specialties?**

The unpredictable nature of medical decision-making is influenced by various factors worldwide, ranging from natural disasters like hurricanes to political events such as elections. As medicine is closely intertwined with logistics, it is subject to the geopolitical landscape at any given time.

In my practice of travel medicine, I integrate skills from various medical disciplines. This includes drawing knowledge from tropical medicine, occupational health, public health, and preventative medicine. The focus is on identifying and mitigating specific disease risks, optimising chronic conditions, and preparing for any acute deterioration.

What sets travel medicine apart is its recognition of the cultural influences on disease management, which helps drive better adherence to treatment plans. Additionally, access to comprehensive and accurate healthcare intelligence is crucial in aiding clinical decisions.

Aviation medicine is another fascinating aspect that combines preventive, occupational, environmental, and clinical medicine with an understanding of the physiological and psychological effects of flying on humans. Many travellers are unaware that conditions in the air, such as altered cabin pressures, sound, vibration, and forces of acceleration and deceleration, can impact medical conditions. My training enables me to consider these factors when determining the safest mode of clinical transportation for our members.

## **International business travel is known to present increased risks to employees. What measures can be put in place to help safeguard the health and wellbeing of its globally mobile employees in light of the recognised increased risks associated with business travel?**

Ensuring the appropriateness and safety of quality care is of utmost importance for all travellers. Trusting in a system of checks and balances, patients rely on healthcare providers to deliver services and perform procedures safely. However, consistency in quality care varies globally, leading to skewed perceptions of where it is available.

As a company, we prioritise the meticulous construction of our international provider network, placing a strong emphasis on due diligence, credentialing, and assessments.

- Due diligence involves conducting comprehensive assessments of known risks before engaging with third-party healthcare providers, particularly in unfamiliar and high-risk territories
- Provider credentialing entails thoroughly vetting backgrounds and assessing current competency levels to ensure that providers are qualified to deliver services that meet international standards of care. This applies not only to hospitals and clinics but also to medical and emergency transport providers including air ambulances
- Onsite clinical and logistics assessments involve either our team or one of our 30-plus in-market physician advisors physically visiting the provider to verify their capabilities.

When it comes to medications, making informed pharmacy decisions can be challenging even at home. Now imagine facing this challenge while stationed abroad with a language barrier and navigating a new healthcare system. That's why we collaborate with OptumRx to fill and deliver prescriptions, provide clinical management, and ensure the affordability of prescription medications where available globally.

### Looking ahead to the future of health care, in what ways is technology transforming care delivery for international patients?

International travellers are on the go. They want a simplified and better experience that lets them the freedom to access care and support on their terms. We need to be where they are, using data and technology to deliver relevant services for their lifestyle.

To meet this need, we are leveraging data and technology to create a "digital front door" for healthcare that makes it easier for individuals and families to get care when they need it. This includes integrating international, local and appropriate in-person and virtual care technology solutions into consumer-facing apps and websites. We also leverage another UnitedHealth Group company, Optum, to expand our healthcare and security technology offerings. Optum's advanced analytics and artificial intelligence (AI) help us find the right care for the right person.

Mental health is an area where an increasing number of health insurers are recognising the link between behavioural and physical health, particularly in relation to employees who have been placed overseas for work or are suffering from an increase in work-related stress. From an employer's perspective, the adoption of mental health technology solutions within an international benefit plan may help address the complex and multifaceted needs of employees wherever they are in their personal health care journeys. To serve our members, we offer a series of tools to help support employees in their professional and personal lives including:

- My Wellbeing is an online tool that focuses on seven key areas to help individuals create and sustain positive change right from the palm of their hand
- LiveWell provides members with resources designed to help improve their wellbeing and create the life they want. On-demand articles and tools, like self-assessments and mental health screeners, are available 24/7 in multiple languages
- Mindful Matters is an evidence-based mindfulness programme that helps improve health, productivity, and engagement. Participants can attend live,

interactive sessions with certified experts, access hundreds of hours of on-demand content and receive personalised strategies to integrate into their daily life

- With financial stress on the rise, our Financial Wellbeing programme helps individuals build a budget, reach their savings goals, reduce debt, or plan for retirement. It also includes a financial stress assessment, calculators, and articles.

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Within the context of travel, employers have a duty of care obligation to assess and mitigate the risks involved for employees travelling for business. To help our clients fulfil this obligation, we use security technology to make it easier for an organisation to prepare, plan and respond to risk. WorldWatch Monitor, our traveller and asset tracking tool, is a digital safety and security platform that keeps assets close, even when they are miles away. With destination-specific, interactive maps that populate with real-time intelligence alerts, travellers receive detailed advisories, itineraries and more.

### How has technology transformed your interactions with patients as a physician?

In our remote medical services division, we have been utilising telephonic and video consultations for several years to support

various industries, making me well-versed in healthcare technology for this purpose. One notable advancement in this field is the development of sophisticated monitoring kits capable of transmitting data such as blood pressure and electrocardiographs via satellite links, necessitating stringent data security measures.

As a GP in the UK, I have observed that the shift towards telephonic consultations, as opposed to face-to-face visits, has improved access to care, particularly for working-age patients who may have faced difficulties reaching the clinic. Additionally, the widespread adoption of secure, two-way text communication during consultations has significantly enhanced our ability to exchange information with patients.

While the ongoing evolution of technology in medicine continues to impress and astonish, there are situations where it can never replace the expertise and support of a human professional, especially when someone is in distress or simply in need of assistance. As humans, we are inherently wired for connection, making community interaction an essential component of health and overall wellbeing.



#### DR SHOBA SUBRAMANIAN

Dr Shoba Subramanian is UnitedHealthcare Global Medical Director for the Europe, Middle East and Africa regions. She leads clinical teams in the UK, Europe and U.S. to help deliver safe medical transportation for assistance and insurance members. Shoba holds Diplomas in Tropical Medicine, Lifestyle Medicine and Obstetrics and Gynaecology, and has considerable knowledge of global healthcare systems – with expertise in travel health, aviation medicine and occupational health. She is a GP and Advanced Life Support-certified doctor, providing clinical care remotely, and has coordinated hundreds of medical evacuations across the world to date.