In June, I embarked on a 10 week placement to Senegal with Y Care international, a government funded development programme. I and 6 other volunteers from the UK were placed in Ziguinchor, one of the bigger cities situated in the south. I stayed with the Bojang family who lived a few minutes away from the local YMCA where we were based.

Upon the first week of arrival, we received training on a number of health issues affecting the Senegalese population. These included Tuberculosis, malnutrition, HIV and aids, Malaria, STI’s and poor sanitation. HIV and STI’s are often seen as taboo subjects for most although it is highly prevalent. Thus, our main role was to go into different communities in Ziguinchor as well as surrounding villages to raise awareness of the causes, symptoms, treatments and prevention of these illnesses. Most importantly, we emphasized the importance of seeking legitimate medical treatment in hospitals rather than going to unreliable pharmacies or traditional healers who may worsen their situation.
Given the fact that most in the community could not afford medical treatment, we also publicised a new Government health initiative known as ‘Universal health coverage’. It costs 3500 CFA per year (equivalent to £4 or so), per person, and in most cases, 80% of the medical costs are covered. During home visits, we discovered that many people were not in possession of the card nor were they even aware of its existence. As a result, we co-organised a rally around town in order to inform citizens about it and also provided facilities for them to sign up to the scheme during the rally itself.
I spent a lot of time working in health centers, particularly in pharmacies. My role was to assist the pharmacist in delivering the prescribed medication and explaining to the patients how to take the medicine. It was an excellent experience to see the working dynamics of the pharmacy which was more meticulous (in terms of record keeping of the medicines given) than expected.

We also joined an organisation called Child fund which measured malnutrition in children aged 6 months to 5 years. During home visits in the local community, we checked whether all the children in the family had undergone malnutrition tests, had all their vaccinations, whether the family drank water from a clean source, whether they slept under mosquito nets, if they had universal health coverage and their overall hygiene. This was quite essential as we found that large numbers of people occupied small dwelling meaning that at times, there were not enough resources to go around.
In addition to our health related work, we also ran two weekly English clubs, one on Tuesdays at the University, and on Wednesdays at the YMCA. This proved to be extremely rewarding as not only did we form stronger ties with the youths in the community, but we also observed improvements in their English (as well as in our Wolof and French).

One of the key aspects of our placement was the development challenge in which we spoke to local residents about the problems that afflict them and what solutions they thought would help to improve the situation. In one of the villages, Elinkine, we helped to rebuild the structure of the village’s main water well. In addition,
the water pump was also fixed which made an immense difference as it meant that water could be supplied to taps around the village (rather than residents having to walk long distances to the well in order to fetch water).

Before embarking on this placement, I hoped this programme would be an eye-opening experience which would give me a new-found appreciation for the things that we often take for granted. I can honestly say that I have. Going into rural communities and observing the lack of opportunities and medical facilities, it truly makes me thankful for the services available in the UK. It also inspires me to do my upmost to help those less fortunate than I.

The fact that I had no prior experience in many of the tasks we embarked upon has broadened my repertoire of skills from working efficiently in a group for an extended period of time, public speaking, organising events and most importantly effectively communicating with others even if there is a language barrier. Overall, this has been an amazing experience which is all in part due to the QM expedition fund, so I sincerely thank you for your support.