

Elective Report – Rarotonga 2018

By Amy Aitken, 4th year, Western Sydney University

During November and December of 2018 I was fortunate enough to spend 4 weeks on the lovely island of Rarotonga, in the Cook Islands. I would like to thank the St Vincent's Pacific Health Fund for awarding me the Andrew Dent Scholarship as well as the Rarotonga Hospital for welcoming me. My first thought getting off the plane was that I had arrived in the film set of Moana. The lush green island with tall central mountains, and all completely surrounded by beautiful blue lagoon – I had arrived in paradise.



One thing I hoped to gain during my time was an appreciation of a different health system and the challenges they face. Rarotonga is the main island of the Cook Islands and is hence responsible for the majority of health care provisions. The hospital itself consisted of an ED, medical and surgical wards, two theatres, a maternity and paediatric ward, as well as a busy outpatient department. On the island there was also a community health clinic and well as a strong public health focus, including large billboards around the island informing the public about the dangers of smoking, uncontrolled diabetes and the importance of regular exercise and wearing a helmet.

On my first day of obstetrics and gynaecology I was introduced to the wonderful Mrs C, who was responsible for the running of the O+G clinic. First task for the morning was following up the cervical cancer screening program. In Mrs C's own words 'There's no letter boxes in Rarotonga, where would we send our reminder letters? Stick them to the coconut tree outside?', and she was completely right. Later in the week Mrs C was appearing on local island radio to speak about the importance of regular cervical screening. Any time a woman came into clinic her last test was checked and she was offered to have it repeated if it was due, and hence many women have their screening during the 3rd trimester of the antenatal period.

Something I have always loved about medicine is being able to follow up on patients and one of my favourite memories from my time in obstetrics and gynaecology was a lady who came in with hyperemesis gravidarum; in my head I ran through some potential differentials (past history, molar pregnancy, twins). Fortunately, as we had an ultrasound machine in the clinic room we were able to perform a transvaginal scan to investigate what was going on. The answer was there obvious on the screen, it was twins! We informed the mother and congratulated her, she was quite taken back but happy none the less. As only one or two sets of twins are born on the island every year I felt extremely privileged to have been part of this wonderful experience.



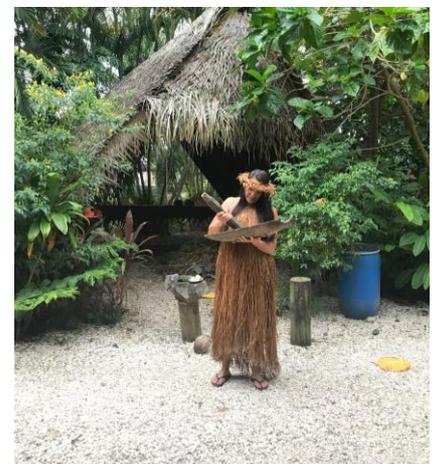
As indicated by the anecdote above, I quickly learnt during my time in O+G that the skill and dedication of the doctors and midwives was immense. I will admit that early on my own ultrasound skills were minimal at best, however on the island all scans are performed in the consulting room by either the doctor or midwife (and eventually myself!). They performed the scan for a range of gynaecological and obstetric causes and interpreted it themselves with expertise and ease, their wide skill set was very impressive. I am very grateful for the opportunity to have

performed so many scans myself as well as for the kindness and supervision to ask so many questions and overall gain knowledge and a new skill.

The delivery suite in Rarotonga hospital comprised a single bed. It contained most of the medical equipment I was used to, such as blood pressure machines, CTG, forceps and vacuum trays, resuscitaire. However what was notably absent was any means for pain relief. For the incredibly strong women of the Cook Islands, pain relief is not a normal part of child birth. There is no gas, no epidurals, no water injections, no hot showers, no acupuncture, no essential oils or calming music. Morphine was available, however I did not see one woman accept it. It was very impressive to say the least and generally labour was not a prolonged experience. It was a very natural process and fortunately I only witnessed positive outcomes, yet it was still eye opening to see how social and cultural differences can have an impact on health care.

It was not all work work work on the island though, many of the best experiences I had were outside of the hospital. As I was there over the Christmas period, myself and a few other medical students were lucky enough to be invited to a Christmas party. While the hospital was small compared to Australian standards, each department still had their own Christmas party, however to keep numbers up all staff were invited to every Christmas party. Families and kids too! These tended to be big affairs, one party lasted for 3 days and included resort stays, mini golf, picnics and a church service. We attended the buffet dinner for the O+G staff and even won a prize simply for being 'The Medical Students' even though our black and gold themed costumes had been thrown together last minute.

The rest of our time was filled enjoying all that island life has to offer. Many an afternoon was spent swimming in the lagoon, climbing the interior mountains or trying to de-husk and correctly open a coconut (I learnt first hand of the many incorrect ways). One evening we went on a traditional village tour and learnt about traditional dress, fishing and medicine. We learnt about how nu from the coconut can supplement a newborn when a mother is not producing enough milk, and how chilis can be used on a range of tropical bites. We saw construction of traditional outfits used in Polynesian dancing and then able to witness the formidable hip shaking and fire twirling.



In conclusion I feel very fortunate to have spent 4 weeks in a tropical paradise and call that my elective. I have learnt so much from the lovely staff at Rarotonga Hospital, and it has opened my eyes to all the opportunities that have been offered to me simply by studying something I love. I am grateful to have been a recipient of the Andrew Dent Scholarship and can say wholeheartedly my time spent in the Pacific was one of the most memorable in my life.