

Andrew Dent Student Scholarship

Fiji Village Project 2019 Medical Elective Report

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This January, I had the privilege of participating in the Fiji Village Project, a student-run public health initiative established by medical students from Australian National University, Fiji School of Medicine, and the University of Auckland. Around fifty students in medicine, nursing, and dentistry spent two weeks in Suva, dividing their time between hospital rotations and health screening in a remote village. The program has been running for over ten years.



Fiji Village Project participants 2019

My first week was spent at Colonial War Memorial Hospital completing rotations in emergency, obstetrics, and surgery. The hospital is Fiji's major teaching and referral hospital.

Fiji has the highest death rate from diabetes in the world, and I saw several cases that reflected this. The septic operating theatre was devoted almost entirely to debriding and managing infections resulting from diabetes. Amputations, even above-knee amputations, were routine and conducted almost daily. In the emergency department, patients presented with late stage complications of diabetes, often with no idea they had the condition. I felt that learning about diabetes in such a different context would be valuable in dealing with the condition in the future back in Australia.

Colonial War Memorial Hospital has limited funds and resources. This was impressed upon me before I had even left for Fiji: the packing list advised to bring your own hand sanitiser as it was scarce at the hospital. During my rotation, I witnessed a sterile glove being used as a surgical drain because proper equipment was lacking, and non-urgent surgeries were

cancelled because the major autoclave was out of order. In the labour ward, midwives explained that instead of epidurals, the only pain management options available were 'opioids and reassurance'. Three newborns piled together in an incubator were not triplets as I had assumed – there was only one incubator for the hospital, and these three babies would have to squish up as there was another soon to join them! There were also limits on staff: while I was in emergency, there were only three doctors for the entire department, but they assessed each patient so swiftly and skilfully that waiting times appeared comparable to an Australian emergency department.

As Fiji is a relatively small country that is still building up its training programs, there is a limited number of specialists. For example, there is only one plastic surgeon in Fiji and he was on annual leave at the time I was visiting. This left plastics cases in the hands of a single surgeon in training, who was on call not only for plastics, but also for neurosurgery, ENT, and cardiothoracics. I finished my week in the hospital in awe of the breadth of skills possessed by doctors working there and impressed by the ingenuity demonstrated when dealing with limited equipment.

The second week was spent in Nakaiwaga village providing basic cardiovascular health screening and health education. This village of 273 people is situated on a beautiful coastline in Tailevu province, just under an hour by bus from Suva. Despite being so close to the capital, sanitation was vastly different: the village only had three flushing toilets (which often didn't work) and limited access to clean water. While they usually rely on spring water, in a drought this becomes scarce. As part of the project, we raised funds to install two water tanks. This will provide rainwater for the village, which will provide a source of clean drinking water particularly in times of drought.

We also provided basic cardiovascular screening for the villagers, measuring blood pressure, blood sugar, and BMI. Not only did this provide an opportunity to counsel the villagers on lifestyle changes and seeking medical attention where appropriate, but it also provided important data for the Fijian Ministry of Health.

In order to reach every adult in the village, a small team of us made house calls to those who were not able to make it to the village hall for health screening. As we clambered up and down steep muddy hills, we began to see why some of the older villagers could not make the fairly strenuous trip to the hall. Being invited into their homes and seeing so much of the village was a special experience that I will not forget.



On our way to visit houses in the village for health screening

On other days, the team provided health education. For the children, this included topics such as dental hygiene and hand washing. The team also provided information about cervical screening for the women, and this was followed up by a visit from doctors to do Pap smears. The Fijian students were excellent in taking the lead on the education, as they spoke the language and were able to speak about potentially sensitive topics in a culturally appropriate way.

Another service provided through the program was a mobile dental clinic set up in the village hall. Dentistry students from the program assisted Fijian dentists in conducting these consultations. I was impressed by the way that they managed to transport most of a dentist's office to the village. Having health services come to them is crucial, as the trip to Suva or the nearest town is expensive and far for many villagers.



Dental clinic set up in village

Our time in Nakaiwaga concluded with a kava ceremony and lots of singing and dancing. Shortly after, it was time for the Australian and New Zealand participants in the project to leave for the airport – there were lots of hugs and promises to see each other again! In my opinion, one of the most important parts of the project were these connections formed between students in neighbouring nations. I hope the friendships we formed between Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji will persist long after graduation, allowing the sharing of knowledge and skills between countries. I hope our experiences will encourage us to return to Fiji, when we are further into our careers and can use our skills to improve healthcare in the South Pacific region. I certainly cannot wait to return and am incredibly grateful to the support of the Andrew Dent Scholarship for facilitating this experience.