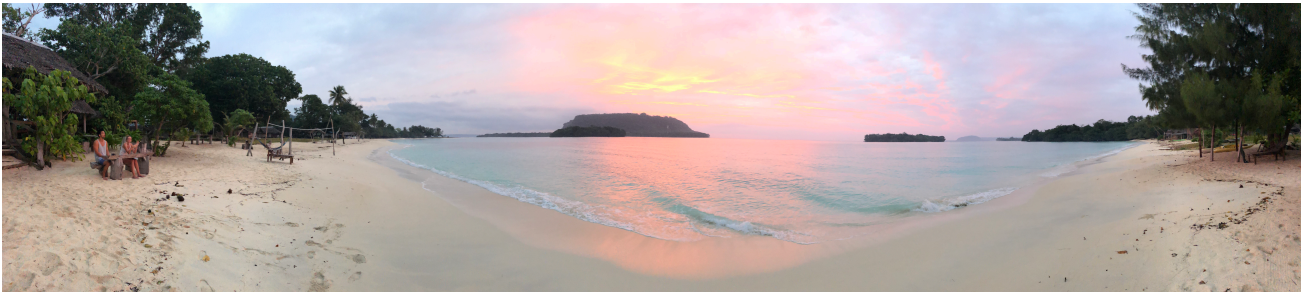


# Vanuatu Elective July/August 2018



During my winter holidays in 2017, my mother kindly offered to take me on a holiday. Not wanting to spend too much time in transit, I used Google maps to find a nearby island, and landed on Vanuatu; what a stroke of luck. In my short two weeks there I was completely bewitched by the vibrant, resilient, and friendly culture residing basically on our doorstep. When I had the opportunity to travel overseas the following year on a medical placement I already had Vanuatu in my sights.

So in July 2018, I travelled to Port Vila Central Hospital with a classmate of mine for a six-week placement in general surgery. I had no idea what to expect but certainly was surprised to find the state of the facilities at the hospital given my exposure to the luxuriant dwellings of the holiday properties the previous year.

The hospital is divided into two wings; a large building constructed by the Chinese Government, which is comprised of the ED, outpatient clinics, meeting rooms, radiology and theatre. The older part of the hospital houses the wards; surgery, medical, paediatrics and obstetrics and gynaecology.

In the first week of placement, there was a visiting team of Emergency medical staff conducting a teaching course which my classmate Jeff and I attached ourselves to, which turned out to be such a blessing. We were able to get to know all the junior staff in a relaxed way, as well as brush up on our own basic life support skills, and participate in teaching. Following their departure, we busied ourselves on our respective wards.

In my short time there, I tried not only to participate in the surgical placement, but also to understand how the hospital functions, as well as how the health system in Vanuatu is progressing. The surgical department is intermittently stocked by donations mostly from Australia, which includes endoscopic machines, defibrillators and the dressings used.

There is no CT scanner in Vanuatu; the closest being in Fiji, hence the most comprehensive diagnostic imaging is X-ray. There are some ultrasounds in the hospital but they are seldom utilised due to lack of training. To my genuine astonishment, this was also true for the defibrillators; seldom utilised due to unfamiliarity.

With a tiny population of only 280,000 sprinkled across eighty-two islands, providing adequate medical care to all citizens is a logistical nightmare. District nurses run clinics on the more remote islands, and they are accessible via plane or boat. Port Vila Central is the only tertiary hospital for the population and is 1 hour by plane from some of the most northern islands.

A large proportion of the patients on the surgical ward were patients with complications of diabetes. NCDs place a huge burden on the health care system in Vanuatu,



Volunteering as a Trauma Patient for the teaching course.



Air retrieval from Pentecost, one of the northern most islands.

largely due to the introduction of rice into the diet. Rice was not traditionally part of the cuisine and now comprises a huge proportion of the culture's cuisine. Importations of other foods that are high in sugar have led to high rates of Type 2 diabetes and thus complications. From a surgical perspective this mainly results in patients with non-healing ulcers, made worse by the environment in the hospital; damp, warm, and overcrowded.

Aside from this, there are also occupational traumas exclusive to Vanuatu; shark bites, fishing injuries, and patients who fall from the back of overcrowded trucks.

During our stay there, the Chinese Mercy ship visited Port Vila and opened its doors to anyone who was willing to wait in line at the docks. The real result of this visit was an unprecedented influx of patients the following week thrusting into our hands CT scan results.. Entirely written in Chinese characters.

The language spoken in Vanuatu is Bislama, and I threw myself heavily into learning the language, spending lunch times in the tearooms and insisting people only interacted with me in Bislama. Given the similarities of Bislama with English, I was soon able to interact and understand enough to get around and for the ward round to be conducted in Bislama. This assisted me in interacting with patients from outreaching islands where English is less common – it did however result in many raised eyebrows and astonished laughs from some of the older population who had rarely come into contact with Bislama-speaking young foreigners.

During time outside of the hospital I spent a lot of time underwater. I had been diving the previous year and found the waters surrounding Vanuatu to be so vibrant (and warm!). The

frequency of our visits to the dive shop resulted in discounted dives, further encouraging our occupation of the dive boats. We formed great friendships not only with the staff at the hospital, but also the boys from the dive shop and other medical students who were visiting.

I have every intention of returning to Vanuatu when I am able to work there, and try assist in helping them to develop an autonomous health care system for all their citizens. My Vanuatu elective was an incomparable opportunity and I have the Andrew Dent scholarship to thank for it.



The boys from the dive shop with Jeffrey and I.

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