

Andrew Dent Student Scholarship Elective Report

Vila Central Hospital, Port Vila

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In January 2020 I had the opportunity to complete a four-week medical elective at Vila Central Hospital in Port Vila, Vanuatu. Vanuatu is a Pacific Island Nation made up of over 80 small islands. While its beautiful beaches and clear waters makes it a popular travel destination, it is also one of the least economically developed countries in the world with significant barriers in accessing high quality healthcare for a significant proportion of the population.



My time at Vila Central Hospital was divided between general medicine and paediatrics. The general medicine ward consisted of a male and female side, one isolation bed, and one high dependency bed. As part of the team, I was able to assist during ward rounds, outpatient reviews, as well as simple procedures such as cannulations. My time on paediatrics was split between the ward and the special care nursery where I had the opportunity to observe caesarean sections and other high-risk deliveries and perform newborn checks.



Ward Rounds on the Medical Ward with Dr Pei (visiting doctor from China) and the team (Dr Terina and Dr Mikaley)

My time at Vila Central Hospital was a really fantastic learning opportunity and an eye-opening experience. It truly demonstrated the challenges that came with providing healthcare in a resource-limited setting and how much healthcare in Vanuatu can differ from that in Australia.

Firstly, the presentations that I saw in Vanuatu were often different to the ones commonly seen back home. A big example is tuberculosis which is endemic in Vanuatu. BCG vaccination is routinely given at birth. However, TB is still a significant issue with a whole ward and specialised nurses for patients receiving TB treatment. Severe acute malnutrition in children was another common presentation that I had never before seen during my time on placements in Sydney. It was disheartening to see these very unwell children who often came from complex social backgrounds and consider the impacts of their nutrition on their future development and health. Fortunately, they were able to receive timely medical attention with emphasis on rehabilitation and parental education, and it was very rewarding seeing their weight gradually creep up until they were safe for discharge.

Diagnosis was another aspect of patient care that differed from what I was used to in Australia. The only diagnostic imaging techniques available were X-ray and ultrasound, with no radiologists to

interpret the imaging, and specialised blood tests could only be done through the private sector at the expense of the patients. Therefore, commonly diagnosis was reliant on the clinician's well-rounded skills and knowledge. They had to not only recognise signs and symptoms and be able to elicit these, they also had to interpret X-rays and blood tests, and then synthesise all the information into a likely diagnosis. While most common conditions were fairly straightforward to diagnose, there were definitely instances where having access to more advanced technology would have made a significant difference to patient care. For example, it was extremely difficult to differentiate between an ischaemic stroke versus a haemorrhagic stroke without a CT scan, so commencement of anticoagulation was often delayed.

Options for patient management were also limited by the resources available. The facilities available on the wards were basic. Only the high dependency bed in general medicine had monitoring equipment. Vitals for all other patients were done once per shift by the nurses. Not every bed was equipped with oxygen and patients sometimes had to be moved around the ward if incoming patients had oxygen demands. Medicines were occasionally out of stock or expired and patient's families were requested to purchase these unavailable medications themselves from the pharmacy and bring them back to hospital. PCI is not an option in Vanuatu so myocardial infarctions were managed with medications to reduce the risk of recurrence. Similarly, strokes were managed with anticoagulation and physiotherapy only.

One patient I'll always remember was an 18-month-old boy who had been brought in with cough, fever and increased work of breathing and diagnosed with right-sided pneumonia. He had been unwell for several days prior to admission and had continued to deteriorate despite oxygen therapy via a non-rebreather mask and antibiotics. He had also begun to show signs of heart failure but the only medicine available was expired digoxin taken from the adult ward. Despite all efforts to stabilise him, sadly he passed away over the night. I couldn't help but think how the outcome may have been different had this been a patient in Australia with access to higher levels of care.

Despite these difficulties, the doctors at Vila Central Hospital continue to work tirelessly to provide the best patient care they can with what they have. On one occasion, the mother of a newborn admitted to the special care nursery was unable to express breastmilk for feeds and there was no formula suitable for the baby in hospital, so the paediatrician went and brought a tub of infant formula from home to feed the baby. Doctors also used other creative ways of overcoming limited

resources, such as adding vegetable oil to breast milk to increase the calories and help babies gain weight.

Apart from the hospital, I was also lucky to have the opportunity to see other aspects of the Island with the other medical students on placement. We had a great time exploring the town and getting to know the local culture and language. We've been able to see the beauty of Vanuatu from warm and friendly local people who greet us every day to the many stunning beaches and swimming holes we have been able to visit.



Blue Lagoon Swimming Hole in Port Vila



Snorkelling at Hideaway Island with other medical students from UNSW (Sarah and Fay)

I would like to sincerely thank the Pacific Health Fund and the Andrew Dent Scholarship for providing me this opportunity. I have had an unforgettable experience that has improved my clinical knowledge and skills and opened my eyes to the challenges facing patients and doctors alike in low-resource settings. I definitely hope to be back to Vanuatu someday in the near future.