

Andrew Dent Scholarship Report 2020: Port Vila Central Hospital, Vanuatu



Figure 1: *Port Vila Central Hospital main entrance, with outpatient clinics on the left and emergency on the right (entrance not pictured)*

In January and February 2020 I spent six weeks on elective at the Port Vila Central Hospital (PVCH) in the capital of Vanuatu (Port Vila). The hospital is the largest of two hospitals in Vanuatu and caters for all the islands of Vanuatu and their people. PVCH comprises four wards (surgery, medicine, paediatrics and maternity), an emergency department and an outpatient clinics. I spent my time in Vanuatu between the general out-patient clinic and the maternity ward. The general out-patients clinic runs five days a week and would be most comparable to our general practice system in Australia. However, at the general outpatients at the PVCH, patients must arrive before the clinic starts to line up and eventually be seen, which may not be for hours depending on the number of patients and their complexity. Non-communicable diseases (injuries and chronic conditions) and preventative care was the major focus of this clinic, as well as administrative tasks, such as fit for school checks, student medicals and police reports. There was an additional chronic condition (diabetes,

hypertension for example) out-patient clinics run by the general medical staff, however many of them were seen in general out-patient clinic instead. What has really resonated with me during my experience of general out-patients is that despite the differences in the health system, the costs and the lack of resources between Vanuatu and Australia, the doctors in Vanuatu are attempting to provide each patient with the best care they can, importantly including preventative care.

Preventative care was a focus of my supervisor Dr. Tari, the only doctor in the general out-patients department. Chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension and coronary artery disease have become a significant burden in Vanuatu, and the impact of health literacy can be profound in minimising the morbidity and mortality for these patients. And the best part – counselling patients on the benefits of lifestyle changes, of smoking cessation, or even why they need lifelong medications costs nothing! I don't think I understood the importance of health literacy, particularly in those with minimal education, however Vanuatu has created a vivid experience for me to always remember this, heightened by Vanuatu's resource limited health system. The sequela of chronic conditions like coronary artery disease (which can include acute myocardial infarctions, known as heart attacks), can be life threatening, particularly when there is no cardiac cath lab or even adequate thrombolysis in the hospital. Rather, a cost-effective option is to try and mitigate the risk of chronic conditions with lifestyle changes and primary preventative strategies.



Figure 2: *One of the two birthing suites in the maternity ward, donated by the Japanese government*

Likewise, the importance of health literacy was at the forefront of my time in maternity. The maternity ward at PVCH is one of the busiest wards in the hospital with numerous births a day, despite only having two birthing suites. The differences I noticed between Vanuatuan and Australian obstetrics included the higher rates of unplanned pregnancy, teenage pregnancy, low rates of contraception utilisation and short inter-pregnancy intervals in Vanuatu. The three above listed examples all carry profound risks, particularly for the mother. For me, all these issues revolved around health literacy – many women I spoke to in maternity did not know what contraception options were available to them, how to get them, or even more simply, how to prevent pregnancy. Multiple health promotion strategies are in place in Vanuatu to try and engage women in their reproductive health, however the strategy I saw most commonly was during post-natal consultations. Obstetricians often attempted to have contraceptive use discussions with patients after the birth of their child, a similar practice to Australia. These discussions often revolved around sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention as well as benefits of contraception for their health. Commonly these conversations ended with patients not wanting contraception, however the obstetricians

noted that more women are wanting contraception, and even seeking out contraception options than before. On reflection these discussions highlighted the importance of incorporating health education into all consultations with patients, as over time their knowledge grows, and their decisions may change.



Figure 3: *Turtle sanctuary for the endangered Hawksbill turtle species on Tranquillity Island*

I am very grateful for my six weeks in Vanuatu and for everything I've learnt from the team of clinicians providing care for the Ni-Vanuatu people. Although my expectations for hands-on experience were met (and exceeded), what has struck with me the most is the importance of educating patients and advocating for greater health literacy. This is something that is integral to all fields of medicine and all health systems, whether that be Vanuatu or Australia. I'd like to express my thanks to the staff at PVCH, for allowing me to be part of their teams, the patients for letting me be involved in their care, and finally, the Andrew Dent scholarship, for assisting me on this placement. The beautiful country, its people and its hospital are experiences I will never forget, and will continue to impact me throughout my career.

Seema Deb