

Medical elective- Vanuatu

Jennifer Xu

MD4, Epworth

In December 2018, I was lucky enough to undertake a three-week medical elective placement at Vila Central Hospital, Vanuatu. This opportunity was possible largely thanks to the support from St. Vincent's Andrew Dent scholarship. I decided to undertake a medical elective in Vanuatu for a number of reasons. Firstly, it allowed me to take a small step towards my ultimate goal as a doctor. That is, to travel to developing and under-developed nations and volunteer to improve medical care in these regions. Vanuatu is a nation with very limited resources, and spending time there allowed me to appreciate ways that medicine can be practiced without heavily relying on technology. Secondly, Vanuatu came highly recommended by others who have had the pleasure of spending time in Vanuatu. They praised their experience for providing them with an unique opportunity to learn and develop as future doctors, as well as allowing them to kick their feet up and enjoy some time away in a tropical paradise. I travelled to Vanuatu with another medical student from Melbourne University. During our time there, we met and became friends with fellow medical students from around the world. Together we shared an experience that we will remember and cherish for the rest of our lives.

Vanuatu is a nation of over 80 islands located in the South Pacific, with a population of over 250,000. The predominant languages spoken in Vanuatu are Bislama, English and French. Ni-Vanuatans are amongst the friendliest, most relaxed and easy-going people I've ever had the pleasure of coming across. It's not uncommon to be greeted by a smile and an enthusiastic 'Hello!' by almost every person you come across on the street. Each morning, our route to the hospital takes us past villages where groups of families live. Although it's immediately obvious to us that the living conditions



are poor and material possessions of these families much less than the average Australian family, it's hard to believe judging from the happiness and positivity that radiates from these communities.

Vila Central Hospital (VCH) is the central hospital of Vanuatu with approximately 200 beds. It is one of the few sources of healthcare in Port Vila, and is also the receiving centre for many of the smaller hospitals in surrounding islands. As such, VCH operates at high capacity on a daily basis, with many patients waiting a long time to be seen. Since Cyclone Pam in 2015, there have been reconstructions and new additions to the hospital grounds courtesy of international aid. The new building of the hospital houses the imaging and pathology laboratories, two operating theatres, an emergency department and outpatient clinics. The rest of the hospital is made up of in-patient wards, namely general medical, surgical, paediatric, maternity and a small psychiatry unit.

In Australia, we often take basic investigations such as routine blood tests, CT and MRI scans and angiograms for granted. However, these investigations are not available in VCH, and patients who require investigations beyond the facilities available in Port Vila are often required to travel to neighbouring islands where they are charged privately. Compounding the scarcity of tangible resources is the shortage of medical staff at the hospital. As a result, common medical protocols implemented in Australia are often not possible at VCH and the highly competent medical and nursing staff are required to think on their feet and outside the box. The team at VCH are friendly and enthusiastic teachers, and I found myself learning a lot under their guidance. There were plenty of opportunities to practice procedural skills including cannula insertions, venepunctures, suturing, back slab applications, catheter insertions, ECGs and injections. The friendly and generous nature of the patients who came through VCH allowed me to practice my history and examination skills. Despite the slight language barrier, they remained patient with me and happily gave up their time. Something that stood out to me during my time in Vanuatu was how well the Ni-Vanuatans contained their emotions. There were a few instances where I was present during the delivery of bad news to the patient and their families (palliative stage cancer diagnosis, miscarriages, foetal death in utero). It still surprises me to this day how composed the patients remained during the discussion. While in Australia a similar discussion would undoubtedly warrant referrals to a myriad of support platforms, no such things exist in Vanuatu. It saddens me to think about these patients coping with such life-altering news on their own. I remember speaking to a woman in the antenatal ward. She has three daughters, with another one on the way. She told me about her husband's illness, and how she works three jobs to support her family because her husband cannot. She told me about how she gave her second daughter up for adoption because she could not afford to feed her family, and how she's planning the same with her fourth baby. She said this in the same matter-of-fact way she might've commented on the weather, the only indicator of her sadness and regret expressed by the painful expression in her eyes and the way she protectively held her stomach. I remember the heavy feeling in my stomach as I listened to her story and came to the realisation that she is not likely to be alone in her situation. Nevertheless, I will never forget this woman and the lesson she taught me about love and sacrifice. Her ability to maintain optimism in the face of hardship is both awe-inspiring and heart breaking at the same time.

Vanuatu was an amazing experience for me, filled with lessons that were both personal and academic. I cannot thank the St. Vincent's Pacific Health Fund enough for their generous contribution. I will forever cherish the memories of my time in Port Vila, and hope to someday return to give back a fraction of what I gained from my time here.

