

Short reflective essay – Lucy Davidson

Thanks to the generous support of the St Vincent's Hospital Pacific Health Fund Andrew Dent Student Scholarship, I recently completed a medical elective placement at the Vila Central Hospital in Port Vila, Vanuatu. It was a four-week placement with a week each in the areas of Emergency Medicine, Internal Medicine, Obstetrics and Gynaecology and Paediatrics. This report is a reflection on some of my experiences, learnings and observations in a clinical and social setting very different from my own.

We began our rotation in the Emergency Department. We were welcomed by locum doctor, Dr Atuwa, from PNG, and he oriented us to our week-long experience by explaining that things there worked a little differently to we might be used to at home. He described the ED as 'organised chaos' and encouraged us to be slow in making judgments about the apparent disorder, instead observing the workings of the department with an open mind.

What immediately struck me about the ED was the lack of resources - soap and appropriately sized cannulas were generally a challenge to find. What became more apparent over our week, however, was the depth of experience of the nurses in the department. Vanuatu has been short on doctors for some time, a shortage just beginning to be addressed now, and the ED in Port Vila was run entirely by nurses until recently. On one occasion during our week there, the doctors were attempting to fix a shoulder dislocation for over an hour to no avail, and ended up calling the surgeon for assistance. Before the surgeon had time to arrive, one of the experienced nurses came over to the patient and enlocated his shoulder in one swift motion, which very much impressed us and the doctors. This nurse, Mary, later discovered that we had not tasted any Ni Vanuatu cuisine, and invited us over to her house on her day off to eat a traditional lap lap with her and her cousin Natasha. The lap lap (pictured below) was a delicious banana, spinach and chicken dish wrapped in banana leaves and cooked over hot coals and with hot stones in the centre. It is a festive meal enjoyed by groups of people sitting in a circle – everyone unwraps it together, and then after fresh coconut milk is poured in to the centre over the hot stones, everyone eats together. It's pictured below – we didn't manage to finish it, so luckily Mary's brothers were around to help us out.



Left to right - Claire, Mary, myself, Erin, Kim and Natasha enjoying Lap Lap

The following week we moved to the general medical ward. The facilities were basic – there is no air conditioning and not much fancy diagnostic equipment – but it was quite pleasant because it was situated on a hill with a good view over the lush tropical vegetation down towards the lagoon, and thankfully a good breeze blows through the open windows.

My impression of the health inequalities between Vanuatu and Australia was reinforced on this ward, because we saw many patients palliated for conditions that are cured or prevented in Australia. One case that will stay with me was a young man who suddenly lost his vision one day, after getting intermittent headaches for two months. He had a brain tumour, and he needed surgery. As he cannot afford to travel for care, he will die in the coming months. Similarly, there was a young man on the ward with Rheumatic Heart Disease who had been flown to New Zealand ten years previously for a life-saving valve replacement. However, the valve has begun to fail, and in Vanuatu there is no cardiac surgeon. He is entirely at the mercy of foreign aid outside his control. This must be a difficult reality for his parents to accept – that their son received lifesaving surgery as a child, but it only bought him ten more

years of life, and now they are faced with the prospect of losing a child to a curable disease, that would be cured if they lived just a two-hour flight away in Australia, or if a surgeon had put in a different type of heart valve, or if a cardiac surgical team happened to be doing a visit to Vanuatu that year. While these fly-in fly-out surgical teams do crucial life-saving work while Vanuatu is developing its own health resources, they also serve as a cruel reminder of the inequalities between the providers and receivers of foreign aid. As it turned out, the young man's shortness of breath this admission was due to an infection, not fulminant heart failure as was originally thought, so the photo below shows me removing his cannula for discharge home. We all hope his valve continues to work for many years to come, at least until the next cardiac surgeon visits.



Patient IJ with myself (removing cannula) with fellow medical student Claire.

There were many aspects of the hospital in Vila that I enjoyed - the relaxed pace, the mandatory two hour siesta lunch break, and the atmosphere of community amongst the staff. I also admired the way patients' families supported them – I saw far more advanced, incurable disease in Vanuatu than in Australia, but nobody in Vanuatu endured their suffering

alone. Patients were inevitably accompanied by an entourage of family members, busy keeping them cool with traditional fans, peeking in through the window if they didn't fit in the room, making sure they had enough water and fruit, and there to comfort and distract them when they were in pain.

As visitors, we were made to feel welcome by the locals of Port Vila. I will definitely miss our walk to the hospital through the village in the morning, complete with lots of friendly hellos and wishes of 'nice day!' from people eating breakfast together outdoors, dodging roosters, enjoying the kids singing ABBA to us (we played it to them off our phone once) or putting their running shoes on and joining us on our afternoon jogs around the neighbourhood.

My final photo shows myself and some fellow medical students enjoying the beautiful Rentapao river waterfalls in the afternoon. I would like to thank the Pacific Health Foundation for supporting our wonderful experience in Vanuatu and at the Vila Central Hospital. We've been welcomed, seen things we wouldn't see at home, learned new skills and gained clinical experience as well as a better understanding of both the challenges in delivering healthcare in our Pacific region, so close to home, as well as the gaining insight into the region's strengths and experiencing its remarkable beauty.

Permission was obtained from subjects photographed. I give consent for my report and pictures to be shared, including on the website.



Sarah, Dan, Claire, Van, Erin, me, and Kim enjoying Rentapao river falls, just outside Port Vila.