

## **Vanuatu – experiences and insights from an elective in paradise**

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When planning my medical elective, I sought a location which would enable me to gain an understanding of the care provided particularly to women and children in a community with relatively limited technology and resources and to contrast this with my experience in a major tertiary hospital in Victoria. At the same time, I hoped to experience a new culture and way of life and perhaps even learn a new language. Vanuatu fulfilled all these criteria.

Vanuatu is an archipelago of about 80 islands, 69 of which are inhabited. It gained independence in 1980 after more than 70 years of colonisation by Britain and France and the influences of both countries remain visible in Vanuatu culture and language with English, French and native Bislama all spoken. Nevertheless Vanuatu retains some of its traditional “Kastom” culture and way of life. Despite recent economic growth, Vanuatu continues to face many health challenges, including ongoing difficulties with the provision of essential health and education services to its predominantly rural communities.

For my medical elective and with the assistance of the Andrew Dent Scholarship, I chose to spend nearly 5 weeks in early 2011 in Luganville on the island of Espiritu Santo in northern Vanuatu. There the country’s second largest hospital, the Northern Districts Hospital, provides emergency, outpatient and inpatient medical, surgical, paediatric, and obstetric services to a population of approximately 32,000 people. On arrival I found myself to be one of 8 Australian medical students from 3 medical schools. We were immediately made to feel very welcome and valued for our skills but free to choose both our work hours and activities. We were encouraged to attend in the mornings and to observe the “siesta” between 11.30am and 1.30pm. Afternoons at the hospital were typically quieter, allowing time for sightseeing and relaxing. My interest lying primarily in obstetrics, I chose to spend the majority of my time whilst at the hospital in the maternity ward. I found that despite many similarities in obstetric care, there were striking differences such as unavailability of analgesia during labour and a resulting difference in attitudes to pain and suffering such that women laboured quietly and uncomplainingly. Outside of the maternity ward I saw enormous abscesses drained in theatre and men lying in traction for femoral fractures, there being no specialist orthopaedic services. I also learnt enough Bislama to communicate in basic terms with patients.

Outside of the hospital I enjoyed getting my scuba diving license and swimming, snorkelling and kayaking in the warm tropical waters. There are some spectacular beaches on Santo island including pristine Port Olry and the famous Champagne Beach. I spent a day trekking through the jungle, traversing the Millenium Cave by torch-light and swimming in fresh water where the fish can be enticed to you by throwing coconut meat into the water. The group of us were also lucky enough to be invited by the cook at the hospital to spend a day in her village in South Santo, to which we traveled, like real locals, in the tray on the back of a truck.

All in all my experience was unforgettable, rewarding and enriching and I am extremely grateful for the opportunity that the Andrew Dent Scholarship and the staff of the Northern Districts Hospital afforded me.