

Elective in Aitutaki Hospital, Cook Islands - January 2013

Devorah Heymann

With a special thanks to the Pacific Health Fund for making this experience possible

This report is regarding my three week medical elective in Aitutaki Hospital, in the Cook Islands. I am a third year postgraduate medical student undertaking the University of Melbourne's new MD program. As part of this course, we needed to complete a medical elective, in any hospital that does not have a relationship with our university. My friend Katerina Michalidis and I decided to go to Aitutaki, a small island in the Cook Islands.

The hospital

Aitutaki hospital is a small hospital with only 2 doctors and 20 beds run by Dr Koko. The outpatient department functioned like general practice rooms. Because the doctors at this hospital were the only doctors on the island, we would deal with a very large range of medical presentations, from needing a new medication script, to patients in the end stages of heart failure, to motorcycle accident injuries. The hospital also ran antenatal clinics and had a small procedures room where they would stitch up wounds and perform minor surgeries, such as draining abscesses.



Above: the hospital sign and details



Above right: Dr Koko, Katerina and I

The hospital was resource poor. Since we knew this beforehand we brought medical supplies with us through the Victorian Student Aid Program (VSAP). However, the hospital still ran out of basic medications such as permethrin cream (for scabies, which was endemic) and flucloxacillin. The hospital had access to Xray and ultrasound. Blood tests, other than FBEs, had to be flown to Rarotonga, the capital, to be processed twice a week. Therefore, investigations in emergencies were very difficult to organise and you needed to use clinical judgement mostly to guide therapeutic decisions.



Above: delivering medical supplies



Above: outside the hospital



Left: the hospital pharmacy

The hospital was also understaffed. This meant that Katerina and I were given a lot of responsibility. We consulted patients in the outpatient clinic on our own, but we were always able to contact the doctors for a second opinion.

Unfortunately, most of the adults on the island had diabetes, obesity or hypertension. However, it was heart-warming to be witness to the proactive measures the community, together with Dr Koko, were taking to combat this. There was a community walking group that was started and community Zumba classes too, that everyone, indiscriminate of gender or age, would attend. Dr Koko and I also had a meeting with the agricultural minister trying to organise the importation of vegetable seeds. There are no vegetables native to Aitutaki and its isolation makes finding vegetables on the island extremely difficult.

Overall, we had a wonderful clinical experience. We were completely integrated as part of the medical team, worked with knowledgeable and welcoming health professionals and had great exposure to many diseases unseen in inner-city Melbourne.

The social life

Other than the community Zumba classes, there were many more perks to the Cook Islands. We made many local friends and had the opportunity to go out of one of their boats and explore surrounding deserted islands and snorkel in the magnificent coral reef that surrounded Aitutaki. We got backstage passes island dance shows at the resorts and went on a lagoon cruise with one of the nurses' brothers. We also went crab hunting with a local friend, where you would run after and catch very large land crabs. When we were there, we took part in a festival where all one neighbourhood would open up all their houses to the rest of the island and put on a feast, cooking their specialty ika mata, raw tuna marinated in a spiced coconut sauce.



Above: island dancing night at a resort



Above: crab hunting



Above: the beautiful beaches



Above: learning how to open up a coconut

What I have gained from the experience

Other than learning the correct way to crack open a coconut and catch a giant crab, there were many other things I have brought home from Aitutaki. I learnt how the exact same medical presentation can generate a completely different differential list, depending on the country you are in. I learnt how to trust my clinical judgement on not have to rely on investigations for a diagnosis. I also learnt the importance of primary healthcare, of promoting healthy eating and exercise. One of the most unexpected things I took away from my experience was the importance of community and how that support can help encourage people to better their lifestyle choices and health.