

Samoa: Elective Report

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I arrived in Samoa late on a Friday night to the sound of a live band adding colour to the wait for baggage. During the four hour flight from Auckland I had already been invited to a wedding and offered to be shown around the islands by a Samoan returning home for a few weeks. Over the month I spent in Samoa I would find that these were only the first in a long list of gestures of hospitality and generosity which form such an important part of Samoan culture.

The Independent State of Samoa comprises the western part of the Samoan Islands and is made up of two main islands Upolu and Savaii as well as a number of smaller islands. The population is approximately 200,000 of which around 75% live on Upolu. Obesity and diabetes are prominent health problems in the adult population, and the lack of established preventative medicine means that many patients present late in the course of an illness. The main hospital, located in Apia, and where I spent my elective, is in the process of being renovated with a loan from the Chinese government. There are also a number of clinics located across the islands and a smaller hospital in Savaii.

After a slow start paying fees and filling out paperwork, myself and another medical student made our first appearance on the paediatric ward. The ward is located in a wing of the new building opened late last year – the tiled floors and air conditioning provide a contrast to the ED and outpatients department which continue to operate in the old building. Two consultants, four registrars and two interns staff the paediatric department and cover the ward, NICU and outpatients. On arriving for our first ward round we were greeted warmly by the consultant and registrars and given a quick orientation as to the usual daily proceedings. The two Samoan medical students based on the ward were incredibly welcoming and went out of their way to help us out over the course of our time on paediatrics. I was impressed with the way in which they were integrated into the team - taking responsibility for admitting patients and being given repeated opportunities to practice procedures. The consultant and registrars dedicated a large proportion of time to teaching, and the bedside teaching in Samoa was some of the best I've had in my time as a medical student. We were exposed to a number of conditions uncommon in Melbourne hospitals, such as malnutrition, typhoid and rheumatic heart disease, and saw a number of children with more advanced presentations of common diseases. Speaking to the paediatric doctors, it appeared that general community awareness of health, preventative medicine and standards of hygiene was often lacking, leading to inadequate diets, repeated infections, and problems with adherence to medical treatment. The practice of traditional medicine in some villages also contributed to the delay in seeking medical treatment.

Despite the recent construction of a new hospital, resources remain limited, and throughout my time on paediatrics the doctors repeatedly emphasised the importance of using available resources with caution. This awareness of the impact of resource consumption taught me to think more critically about the way in which resources are consumed in Australian hospitals, and the importance of considering the necessity for and reasoning behind the investigations we order. The lack of specialists practicing in Samoa also meant that each doctor was required to have a broader skill base – the paediatric consultant based on the wards gave us an excellent bedside tutorial on echocardiography whilst examining a patient admitted with rheumatic fever. Another consequence of the lack of specialists is the need for patients to travel to New Zealand for treatment or wait for travelling teams, if they require more complex interventions.

Beyond broadening my understanding of medicine in a developing country I was able to take the time to travel around Samoa and become immersed in the Samoan culture and way of life. I was lucky to have stayed at Lynn's Getaway in Apia, with a wonderful group of staff who welcomed us from day one and made us feel like part of a small family. The three women who worked there Val, Fata and Pina went out of their way to help us out, the chef Paulo always had a story or joke to tell as well as preparing a long list of delicious meals, and the owner's son Charles took us to a number of his favourite spots around the island. There were many opportunities to travel outside Apia, and I made a number of afternoon and weekend trips with the other elective students. One stand out trip was to Manono Island, a small island off the east coast of Upolu with no roads. As we walked the 1.5 hour trip around the island, we were greeted at each new village by laughing children shouting 'palagi' (the Samoan word for foreigner) and asking where we were going. At the beach fale accommodation we were shown the process of preparing an umu, a Samoan way of cooking using heated stones. It was amazing to see an entire meal prepared off the land immediately surrounding us - the only manmade object was part of a tin can used to peel the breadfruit.

Although there were aspects of Samoan culture which I found difficult to adjust to, such as the social conservatism, other aspects like the sense of community and collective responsibility are something I felt I learnt a lot from. Family is incredibly important in Samoa, and service to your family and community is a great source of pride. It was this sense of belonging and responsibility to a community that I found to be an incredibly enriching part of Samoan culture. The pace of life in Samoa is much slower than what I was accustomed to, and although frustrating at first, I came to realise that it perhaps reflects a different set of priorities – it definitely served to remove a lot of the mental clutter associated with living in a big city.

Overall, I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to undertake my elective in Samoa, and thankful to all the people who made it possible both in Samoa and Australia. I am currently in the process of organising medical supplies to be sent over through the Melbourne University Health Initiative, and am waiting on a request list from one of the paediatric registrars. I not only learned an enormous amount about medicine during my time in Samoa, but having the opportunity to be immersed in another culture is an experience that will benefit me for years to come. I am planning to return to Samoa in the future, and hope to have



the opportunity to work as a qualified doctor in the hospital there one day.



Travelling around Upolu by bus

Outside the new hospital building in Apia