

## Katerina Michailidis

### Andrew Dent Student Elective Scholarship

I recently completed a 4-week elective placement from 4th January 2013 – 4th February 2013 at Aitutaki Hospital in the Cook Islands. My trip would not have been possible without the generous support provided by the St Vincent's Pacific Health Fund Andrew Dent Scholarship and I am very proud to have been able to play a small part in the running of a remote hospital working with many dedicated professionals.



Aitutaki is a 50-minute plane ride from Rarotonga, the capital of the Cook Islands. Aitutiki has a population of approximately 2000 people and is known for its breathtaking lagoon and lush rainforest and the many small islands (called motus in Cook Island Maori) surrounding the main island. It is a popular destination for honeymooners and in 2010 was voted the world's most beautiful island by Lonely Planet.

Despite this, Aitutaki Hospital is the only port of call for any kind of medical attention required on the island. The hospital functions as GP clinic, outpatient services, emergency department, pathology, radiology, pharmacy and hospital for the island's 2000 occupants as well as the many tourists that spend time on the island. There are also midwifery, dental and public health services operating out of the hospital. Despite its many functions Aitutiki hospital is a very small, under-resourced hospital. Dr. KoKo Lwin is the only permanent doctor with other doctors coming in on short-term contracts. However, due to the remoteness and high cost of living (a lot of food is imported from New Zealand) it can be difficult to attract applicants and there can be long periods of time where Dr. KoKo is the only doctor on the island. As such, the nurses are extremely knowledgeable and despite the limited resources, Aitutaki Hospital is able to deliver an excellent standard of care for most of its patients.

During my time in Aitutaki I was given the unique opportunity to run a chronic disease monitoring outpatient clinic under supervision together with another medical student. The educational value of this experience was immeasurable. I learnt a great deal about effective communication. Delivering appropriate education to patients about their chronic conditions is extremely challenging, as many do not see the need to take their medication. "But I feel fine" was a phrase I heard often. Unfortunately, many





presentations to the emergency department were due to known diabetic and hypertensive patients not taking medication or taking it incorrectly.

I also came to realise and appreciate the many unique challenges a small, remote hospital faces. People tend to present much later with more advanced disease and thus require more complicated and protracted care. Many patients prefer to turn to traditional Maori medicine before seeking an opinion from the hospital. Having excellent clinical reasoning skills are essential when working in a remote setting like Aitutaki. Gaining the confidence and trust of the community both inside and outside the hospital is also essential. Due to limited resources, all investigations must be rationalised and essential. Pathology specimens and most blood tests are sent to Rarotonga, or in some cases Auckland, for investigation and reporting. Due to the limited resources of the hospital the more difficult cases from Aitutaki and even the capital, Rarotonga are evacuated to New Zealand for treatment.

In conclusion, my medical elective in Aitutaki gave me a unique opportunity to improve my clinical skills immensely. I developed a sense of self-reliance and confidence that will stand me in good stead. I found the experience challenging, exhausting, exciting and positive and I left Aitutaki in total awe of the doctors, nurses and other allied health professionals who took such good care of their community with so much less than what we have in Australia. The value of the St Vincent's Pacific Health Fund Andrew Dent Scholarship's generous support cannot be underestimated and the experience will stay with me forever.



