

Bula!

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Medical Student Elective
Specialty: Obstetrics and Gynaecology

Location: Lautoka, Fiji

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Supervisor: Dr Amanda Hill

Thank you to St Vincent's Pacific Health Fund

In July I embarked on my elective to Fiji. I was extremely grateful to receive the financial support of the Andrew Dent Scholarship which made this trip possible. I also managed to recruit my partner Nick who undertook a general surgery elective placement at Lautoka hospital.

Life in Fiji

The Fijian medical students included us from the beginning with an initiation at Blue Ginger karyoke bar where Nick couldn't resist his usual Backstreet Boys number. They gave us friendly advice such as stay home if it's raining; made us do the macarena on stage at conference and encouraged us to join their weekly soccer and volleyball despite my lack of skills. By the end of the trip we'd formed close friendships making it hard to return home.

During our time in Fiji we stayed at the Cathay Hotel, not realising our other option, the Northern Club (directly opposite) offered a kitchenette. Instead we prepared meals in our trusty electric fry pan which travelled all the way from Australia with us. We quickly became vegetarian curry eaters after realising the meat on offer included chicken feet and other non-descript items. By the second week we'd found where to buy mince and made a quick transition to all mince recipes. After a week of meal preparation challenges, we thought we deserved a trip to the fried chicken restaurant, where we received a creative group of meals, far from what we ordered, proving an important learning point: Always clarify meal orders.

Kitchen life at Cathay Hotel



Our hotel staff quickly became our friends (facebook official) and were always keen to chat. Everywhere we went, people were on 'Fiji time', strolling nowhere fast, taking in their surroundings and making the time for friendly greetings of 'Bula' and a chat with strangers. I joined the gym with a bunch of local girls who I'd meet for dinners (to escape the electric fry pan) and have a few laughs in the animal kingdom class which involved exercise through impersonating animals.



A definite highlight was being in Fiji for their first Olympic gold medal. During the final, the entire hospital stopped and crowded around the few TVs. No patients were being seen and locals poured into the hospitals in search of somewhere to watch the game. I had just delivered a baby, when the mum and midwife insisted we join the crowds. The entire hospital erupted in roars of excitement! There were parades throughout the streets, an immediate public holiday and a feeling of national pride everywhere for the remainder of the trip.

Holidaying in Fiji

As you can imagine, an elective in Fiji certainly had benefits. Our first trip was out on a ship where we sunbathed on the roof for several hours, before arriving with our group at a private island. We were welcomed to the island with a kava session before beginning the day's activities of kayaking, snorkelling, fishing and volleyball (Fiji versus the rest of the world).

One of my favourite days was going to the zipline which was situated in picturesque rainforest. Again, we joined a nice bunch of Americans and Chinese with our tour guide, 'Jet' who coined us the 'party bus'. By the time we were on the way home, the music and out of tune singing had escalated, meaning there was no option but to continue into the night. So with our group of strangers and our tour guide we went off for a spontaneous night out including dinner and 'taki master' (a local drinking game involving a multiple large jugs of beer).

Jet and the party bus crew



Medicine in Fiji

Being part of an elective in Fiji was a whirlwind of emotions, equating to an unforgettable experience. My first impression was one of shock about the lack of resources. The entire labour ward had one blood pressure cuff, no tourniquets (a glove tied around the arm was used instead) and only one working CTG machine. The colonoscope was stuck overseas where it had been repaired, but there were no funds to get it couriered home. There are countless examples of the challenges of resources, giving me a huge appreciation for what we have in Australia and highlighting how thankful Fiji is for donations.

It became apparent, very early on, how skilled and knowledgeable the doctors of Fiji are. They are easily as skilled and knowledgeable as doctors of Australia despite resource challenges. On my first day I was orientated by a lovely Fijian medical student of equivalent stage to me, "This is where all your equipment is for delivering... here is everything you'll need for managing a PPH... this is where you can perform your colposcopies". I went home terrified, having realised medical students of Fiji are very advanced clinically. Thankfully, the warm friendly nature of Fijian people was my saviour again and I was able to express my limitations and be supported through my clinical responsibilities. As medical students we constantly feel incapable however, by the end of the elective I had the satisfaction of finally feeling confident with certain skills including managing a low risk birth.

During our time, we saw alarming medical presentation every day. I felt as though I saw more clinical signs and pathology in six weeks than I will in several years in Australia, many of which were devastating for patients and their families. I saw teenage girls with ovarian masses the size of soccer balls, goitres as big as google pictures and multiple gangrenous limbs. Our first week was confusing and upsetting as we tried to make sense of why there were so many unwell patients and late presentations.

Delivery room



We slowly gained an understanding of how complex these contributing factors are including belief in natural healing. We asked a senior consultant how he tries to educate people towards modern medicine. He wisely explained to us, "How can I. A natural healer can put banana leaves on a women's breast lump and lift her spirits; whereas a doctor may surgically remove her breast and tell her she may die". Our eyes were certainly opened to the challenges in Fiji including less public policy, low health literacy, minimal health funding and challenges with inter-sectorial collaboration.

Theatre



During my time on gynaecology outreach to the community, I experienced first-hand why cervical cancer prevalence rates are some of the highest reported with late presentations and high case fatality rates. There is no screening program available, with less than 10% of women accessing opportunistic screening. Following this elective, I hope to maintain my connection with Lautoka and look at contributing financially to Professor Naidu's work with reaching out to women who normally have difficulty accessing care. She has been provided with a custom built clinical bus, but her charity based at Viseisei Sai Health Centre needs funds to operate the bus as an outreach medical clinic.

Summary

I cannot thank the Pacific Health Fund enough for the opportunity to do an elective in Fiji which was truly a once in a lifetime experience. Without the Andrew Dent scholarship I would not have been financially able to travel to Fiji. It offered the opportunity to re-connect with a love of medicine and confirm my passion for obstetrics and gynaecology after the exhaustion of study. The Fijian people are welcoming like no other and we both hope to maintain and expand our connections with this beautiful part of the Pacific throughout our careers.

