



Andrew Dent Scholarship

Medical Elective Report
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As a final year medical student I had the privilege of embarking on a self-directed medical elective anywhere in the world. The Solomon Islands came quickly to the top of my list through both personal and professional recommendations. The Solomon Islands is an archipelago nation made up of some 900 islands in the South Pacific. As one of Australia's closest neighbours the Solomon Islands is a country of both serene beauty but also considerable socioeconomic disadvantage. The clinical learning objectives that motivated me to plan this elective included; gaining confidence in practicing in a resource-limited setting; to understand the diagnosis and management of tropical diseases; and to gain further experience in obstetrics and gynaecology, and specifically to understand the challenges of women's healthcare in this region.



Freshly cut coconuts at the secluded Seragi Beach.

Gizo Hospital is the second largest hospital in the Solomon Islands and serves as a referral hospital for the greater Western Province. The hospital is the most prominent building on the small island oasis and can be easily seen on the boat ride from the island airstrip. The hospital has two surgical theatres, four wards (male, female, paediatric and maternity), an emergency department and an outpatient service.

The hospital's medical team consists of 2-3 local Solomon Islander doctors who practice as the ultimate hospital generalists. These doctors impressively work across all specialties; including general practice and emergency medicine whilst also being competent in performing a multitude of operations and managing various complex medical conditions. I found this breadth of clinical competence quite extraordinary, and was particularly



The Gizo Hospital; “A beetle-nut free zone” (with fellow volunteer Dr. Benjamin Pons).

impressed that it was the norm for doctors to work as both surgeons and anaesthetists for the majority of surgical cases (including caesareans!). The emergency department at the Gizo Hospital hosts one resident medical officer from the Saint Vincent’s Hospital Sydney year round. This role is a valuable asset to the local staff and community as well as an added learning opportunity for visiting students.

I was fortunate enough to spend the first week of my elective with a visiting volunteer team of specialists from Australia, who were on a Doctors Assisting in the Solomon Islands (DAISI) gynaecology mission. This was a very busy week and required various surgical and anaesthetic donations from Australia. To facilitate the transport of the consumables and equipment each member of our team opted for oversize baggage and packed our bags to the brim. Luckily the airport personal were understanding when it came to boarding the tiny inter-island airplanes! I enjoyed spending time with the senior clinicians whom had had experience working in overseas aid positions. They imparted on me the importance of creating sustainable cross-cultural relationships when working abroad, as well as investing in local training and education. During this week I was also able to connect with local specialist OBGYNs who had joined the trip from the National Referral Hospital in Honiara with the purpose of gaining laparoscopy experience. It was eye-opening to learn about the challenges of obstetric care in the Solomon Islands on the national level, as well as the lack of a national cervical screening program, and the downstream repercussions of this. My involvement in this surgical week also gave me valuable practical experience in surgical assisting, basic suturing, catheterisation and dilation and curettage.

To complement this specialist week I then spent the remainder of my five weeks working with the local doctors, nurses and midwives. I joined the regular ward rounds, outpatient clinics and saw patients in the emergency department. I enjoyed being able to assist in the Gizo Urban Nursing Service (GUNS) antenatal and gynaecology clinics where I learnt first-hand about the challenges associated with delayed antenatal presentations and the lack of cervical screening. The local midwives were also fantastic



Learning to scuba dive in paradise!

teachers. In the labour ward I was fortunate to gain experience and confidence in intra-partum assessment, normal vaginal delivery as well as learning the fundamentals of perineal repair. I also really enjoyed joining the GUNS team on their outreach tours to neighbouring islands communities. As the majority of the Solomon Islander population live remotely this was a unique insight into the realities of life in the village setting.



Unpacking our medical cargo on a "Satellite" outreach tour (with UK medical student, V, and GUNS nurse).

Working in a remote and low-resource setting was both a challenging and eye-opening experience. Patients from the surrounding islands typically presented late in their clinical course and with severe symptoms. Tropical diseases such as TB, dengue and malaria were all common, and until that time, had been infectious aetiologies that I had only read about in textbooks. As students we were able to play an important role in working up and managing patients in this setting. We

quickly learnt that without many investigations at our disposal (there is no CT/MRI scanner in the whole country!) history and examination were heavily relied upon. This experience thus further refined my clinical skills and, even in light of my very basic/broken Pigin, has enhanced my clinical diagnostic capabilities.

Overall this experience was an enriching and humbling one that came at a very pivotal period of my clinical development. I feel extremely grateful for the support that was offered to me by the St. Vincent's Andrew Dent Scholarship and also for the work that the Pacific Island fund extends to these communities. I feel fortunate that I was able to work along side many passionate and motivated expat and local medical and nursing staff. I hope that I will be able to maintain the personal connections I now have with the Gizo community and that one day I may be able to return to the Solomon Islands as a specialist in my field, and engage in future volunteer work and educational initiatives.



A beautiful Gizo sunset.

ADDIT: Whilst working in the Gizo labour ward I learnt that there was no functioning fetal Doppler in the hospital. As such I took it upon myself to make a crowd-fundraising campaign on the social fundraising website "Chuffed". Through this initiative I was able to raise \$1240 through the support of 26 supporters. I have since been able to purchase two new fetal Dopplers, one neonatal pulse oximeter and make a small donation to DAISI, who helped in transporting the new equipment over.