

Fiji Elective Reflection

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Over two weeks in January 2017 I had the privilege of completing an elective placement with the Fiji Village Project, a project coordinated by the School of Medicine within Fiji National University. I had the opportunity to meet and work with over fifty students from Fiji, New Zealand and Australia from medical, dental and nursing backgrounds.

The project selected two villages, Nabaitavo and Nasavu, approximately 50 kilometres inland from Suva on the main island of Viti Levu.

The first activity we participated in was a welcome ceremony in which the Fijian project leaders explained the aims and activities of the project to the Chiefs and village elders, who then gave us permission to conduct the project in their communities. I was interested to learn that this process is a cultural necessity and we needed to be invited into the community before we could start the project.

The top three objectives of the project were:

1. Installation of rainwater tanks in Nabaitavo
2. Provision of basic cardiovascular screening in Nabaitavo and Nasavu
3. Health education sessions for the children of Nabaitavo and Nasavu

Three rainwater tanks were successfully installed in Nabaitavo village. This secures access to sustainable clean water for drinking and food preparation for 350 people living in Nabaitavo village.

I participated in basic cardiovascular screening comprising of an extensive health questionnaire, body mass index (BMI) calculation, blood pressure and random blood glucose measurement. The final year Fijian medical students then provided some basic counselling to the villagers based on their results. After completion of the screening we collected and processed the data on smoking status, BMI, blood pressure and random blood glucose. This data was then presented to the villagers in a final closing ceremony. The presentation included health promotion messages about smoking cessation, increasing physical activity and healthy eating. In total, we screened 110 adults across the two villages. A summary of the data we collected is included below. There was a higher prevalence of overweight and obese persons in Nabaitavo village compared to Nasavu village which appears to have translated into higher prevalence of cardiovascular disease risk factors such as hypertension. Reassuringly most villagers had normal blood glucose measurements on random screening. This is particularly important as diabetes is contributing significantly to morbidity (by way of lower limb amputations) and mortality in Fiji.

	Nabaitavo Village	Nasavu Village
Total number screened	69	41
Male villagers screened	30	11
Female villagers screened	39	30
Smoking prevalence (%)	35%	39%
Overweight/ obesity prevalence (%)	62%	49%
Hypertension prevalence (%)	42%	20%
Normal random blood glucose (%)	75%	90%

I was interested to learn that although all medical care and some medications for hypertension and diabetes are provided free by the Fijian health care system, the primary obstacle to people receiving medical care is transportation. Although only 50 kilometres from the capital Suva, the villagers in Nabaitavo and Nasavu reported it was difficult to get there as the bus trip takes 60 to 90 minutes and the cost of the fare is out of reach for most villagers.

I also participated in two days of Health Education for the children of Nabaitavo and Nasavu villages. We opted to focus on three topics: healthy foods, hand hygiene and dental hygiene. I found that having been educated in Australia I relied on discussion with the Fijian students to provide health promotion messages that were accessible and culturally appropriate in the village setting. I had to learn about the local health promotion initiatives from the Fijian Ministry of Health such as Fiji's Guide to Healthy Eating, which breaks foods into three groups for Health (fruit and vegetables), Energy (carbohydrates) and Strength (protein). In addition, we had to recognise the resource limitation (soap and clean water) when discussing hand hygiene with the kids. However, it was an incredibly rewarding experience with lots of games, smiles, dance and music to interrupt the more serious lessons.

We were also offered placement days at Suva's Colonial War Memorial Hospital. I did placement in Paediatrics and Obstetrics and thoroughly enjoyed the experience. The contrast to my clinical experience in Melbourne was stark. On my day in the labour ward the hospital ran out of latex gloves and a new supply was going to take at least two days to be ordered and transported from New Zealand. It became clear to me early on that the hospital was incredibly resource limited, with most of the equipment funded by donations from Australia and New Zealand. The limited resources did not impact greatly on patient care, with each medical professional striving to provide the best possible treatment.

I am incredibly grateful to have had the opportunity to participate in the Fiji Village Project with the support of the Andrew Dent Student Elective Scholarship. I enjoyed working with the Fijian and Kiwi students and the experience proved to me that real change can be effected with few material resources and a lot of hard work. I left Fiji with new friends from all over the Pacific region and a renewed perspective. I was reminded of my motivation for going to medical school – working with great teams to help improve the health and wellbeing of those in need. The friendships I made are just the beginning of long-term personal and professional relationships that I'm sure will draw me back to work in the Pacific region.



Elise Cannan (myself) taking the blood pressure of a villager in Nasavu



Centre (left to right): Chief of Nabaitavo Village, Hillary Dinning (Australian Coordinator) and Erima Raikoti (Fijian Coordinator). And the rest of the Australian contingent for the Fiji Village Project 2017 pictured with the largest of three water tanks we helped install in Nabaitavo Village.