

# Colonial War Memorial Hospital, Fiji – Medical Elective Reflection

By Racquel Tovel

In December 2022, after completing my medical degree, I was fortunate enough to experience a two-week placement at the Colonial War Memorial Hospital in Suva, Fiji, with a fellow student, Leo. One of my mentors from Barwon Health, my clinical school, is Fijian and has a strong connection with the doctors in the general surgical department at the hospital. This led me to organise a short placement to experience medicine and culture in Fiji.

When I first arrived in Fiji, I was struck by the raw beauty of the country. There is greenery everywhere and the view from the hospital was breathtaking.

## General Surgery

My time in the general surgical department was invaluable learning while being extremely confronting and shocking. During the ward rounds and surgeries I was stunned at the amount of amputee patients present. The doctors explained that this was mostly due to untreated diabetes and that the primary health care system in Fiji was extremely lacking, with access to General Practitioners being very poor. We had a patient who required surgery but the surgeons could not complete it as she had a low haemoglobin. In order for this patient to receive the blood products she needed, a family or community member would need to donate blood on her behalf. The surgeons explained that most of their surgical equipment was donated by visiting surgeons and that the one and only laparoscopic machine they had was also a donation. This means that most surgeries are completed open due to a lack of resources rather than being the superior clinical choice for a patient. These experiences made very real to me the difference in health care outcomes that different countries experience.



Dr Delasau, Leo (another deakin student) and I standing on the balcony of the hospital



Leo and I standing in front of the hospital



Me closing after a mastectomy in theatre

## What I did

During this placement, I was fortunate to be heavily involved in the surgeries and procedures, I was given more opportunities than would be available in Australia. I sutured, stapled, cut and retracted in amputations, mastectomies, appendectomies, hemicolectomies, surgical castration, brain surgeries and much more. As it was the end of the year, boys from Suva and the surrounding villages aged 6-14 years old were coming in for their circumcisions. This is a tradition in Fijian culture and I was told that over 90% of Fijian men are circumcised. After watching and assisting in the procedure, I was able to perform the circumcisions on my own under supervision. I felt honoured to be included in this tradition, and to be able to help the short-staffed hospital, additionally the procedural skills I learnt are invaluable. After their circumcisions, the boys (now men) are celebrated through a feast.



Me, Leo, his brother and the villagers

### **Fijian Culture and Travel**

Over the course of my time in Fiji I learnt that Fijians are a very happy people who are always ready to laugh despite the poverty that the country faces. The staff at the hospital were very friendly and I received a warm welcome into Fijian culture. On my first day at the hospital, the head of general surgery, Dr Delasau, invited me and Leo to drink kava, a traditional drink made of a root, at his house with his family. This ceremony involved clapping in specific rhythms when accepting your drink in a coconut cup. Dr Delasau later invited me and Leo to his village in the high lands for a celebration. This was a very unique and humbling experience, we were gifted

garlands made from ribbons and flowers at a traditional ceremony led by the chiefs of the villages. The village had not had any foreign visitors for a long time and the children were very excited to have new people to play with and show their favourite spots to. This included a river where over 50 of the children from the village and surrounds would come to cool off from the sun.

We also had the pleasure to travel around Fiji to experience it's extraordinary nature which is very different to the bustling city of Suva. We went to the Coral Coast, Leleuvia island and Nadi. Fiji has a beautiful coast and many activities for people who love to travel.



Me, Leo and friends we made on the Coral Coast



The surgical team playing paintball together with us

### **Final Reflection**

This was an invaluable experience that introduced me to healthcare in the Pacific Islands. I am very grateful to have been welcomed wholeheartedly by the patients and clinicians inside and outside of the hospital and the people of Fiji. I would highly recommend future students and clinicians to visit Fiji and spend time in the hospital and community centres to broaden their understanding of healthcare. I hope to one day return to Fiji as a qualified physician to give back to the community that provided me with so much learning and experiences.