

Andrew Dent Scholarship Recipient – Leo Lambers
Placement: Colonial War Memorial Hospital, Suva, Fiji

At the end of 2022 I was fortunate enough to go to Fiji with another medical student for a surgical placement with the help of the Andrew Dent Scholarship from The Pacific Health Fund of St Vincent's Hospital. This scholarship enabled us to experience the health care system in Fiji and afford an expensive placement, while being broke university students at the end of our degrees.



I studied medicine at Deakin through COVID-19, fortunate enough to have most of my placements at the hospital in Geelong unaffected. One of my mentors at Geelong Hospital is a general surgeon and a Fijian and we went to Fiji as a pilot exchange program, attempting to establish an ongoing relationship between Suva and Geelong. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, our University could not allow overseas electives to happen, so myself and the other student, Racquel, went in our holidays between finishing our degree and starting our internship.



The placement was with the general surgical team at Colonial War Memorial Hospital in Suva, the capital city of Fiji and the main hospital of the country. We did our placement after graduation and over the Christmas period so the hospital was more short staffed than normal and staff were working hard to make up for the lack of resources.

We can only speak of the emergency department and the surgical wards, yet what we saw was under resourced and inefficient, making us realise that while we hear frustrations with the Australian systems, we should be incredibly grateful for the healthcare we deliver and receive. The wards were open, crowded and warm; with no air conditioning (in 30 degree heat) and patients having to bring in their own fans and pillows if they wanted them. The lack of resources really hindered the care that teams were able to deliver; frequently having to cancel cases due to lack of sterile drapes (fabric not disposable because of lack of supply, despite being mostly expensive) or lack of nurses available – lots going to the new private hospital. The lift stopped working for two days, meaning patients were not able to be taken from the wards to theatre if they were not ambulating. X ray machine couldn't print and CT machine only had reports on one computer so the team would huddle and look at results in a crowded room. Families were asked to make TPN blended meals since the hospital could not supply enough to every patient. These are just some of the examples of the way the system ran and why the care delivered to patients was often not optimal.





By the end of our placement we were welcomed by every member of staff and allowed to join in any surgery that was happening on that day. Compared to being a student in Australia, we were much more hands on in Fiji and an added resource the teams needed when short staffed. This resulted in Racquel and I being heavily involved in amputations, mastectomies, appendectomies and circumcisions. Becoming quickly proficient at suturing, stapling, cutting, sawing, retracting and operating the laparoscopic camera. I saw an

incredible amount of amputations due to diabetic foot sepsis and was able to do a below knee amputation myself, with the registrar assisting me. I felt contrasting emotions; very excited as a medical student but acknowledging that this person's life will now be more difficult and they will probably never receive a prosthetic limb when they return to their village, being cared for by their family.

We were lucky to have such kind, caring and personable doctors to support us while we were in Suva, welcoming us to join for trips along the coast, paintball, dinners and multiple Kava nights. At the end of our placement we were invited to go 4 hours inland to one of the surgeon's village for three nights, at the heart of the island. This was a highlight for us, as we were welcomed as international guests and everyone was incredibly keen to talk to us, greet us and welcome us to their house (with yet some more Kava). We played with the children at the local river, painting our faces with crushed rock and tossing frisbee, playing rugby with a ball made of clothes tied together. At night we were formally accepted into the community and told this whole village is now our family (meaning if they ever come to Australia we have to give them a bed and show them around too).

Overall Fiji was the best placement I did at university. Not only did I learn lots about surgical procedures and skills, I was useful to the team and able to contribute to assist in an under resourced environment. I am lucky to have received the Andrew Dent Scholarship, as accommodation, flights and living expenses in Fiji would've made this trip prohibitive if we were not fortunate to receive the financial scholarship.

