

Colonial War Memorial Hospital (Suva, Fiji)

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Over December of 2023, I had the absolute pleasure of undergoing a 4 week long clinical elective at the Colonial War Memorial Hospital (CWMH) in Suva, Fiji. CWMH is the largest and oldest hospital in Fiji and it is located in its capital – Suva. The hospital first opened in 1923 in memory of the Fiji veterans who served in World War I. During that time, it had 27 staff members out of which majority came from Europe. Since then, it became a teaching hospital for the Fiji School of Medicine and Nursing and currently has a total of 1117 staff, who are locally trained.



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Entrance to CWMH Emergency Department

During my elective, I spent majority of my time in the hospital's Emergency Department which provided me with an extremely invaluable and hands-on experience. When I first arrived to the hospital, the team gave me a tour of the department as well as its neighbouring services including radiology, ICU and surgery. At first, I felt quite shocked seeing the state in which the hospital was, especially given CWMH is Fiji's largest and most prestigious hospital. Most wards did not have air conditioning and the windows did not have glass to allow air flow. As a result, patients and staff were often disturbed by flies and other insects flying in and out of the hospital, as well as the high temperatures and humidity outdoors. I was extremely lucky, as a few weeks before my arrival the hospital finally installed two air conditioning units in the ED, making it much more enjoyable to work.

My first day in the ED started relatively quiet, allowing me to get to know the ED team. To my surprise, one of the most senior ED consultants was actually busy cutting up cardboard. When I approached him, he explained that the department does not have enough money to buy pigeonholes for storing documents in an organised matter, so he decided to cut up cardboard and make it himself. He also mentioned that the other week he helped with renovations and painting of the department's walls. I was so shocked, because I have never seen a senior consultant engage in such jobs or volunteer their time to help with hospital renovations in Australia. This quickly helped me realise how



Ambulance bay

privileged our hospitals are and how much we take everything for granted, such as pigeonholes, glassed windows or air conditioning.

The next few days became very busy, with the department completely filling up by around 12pm each day. Unfortunately, motor vehicle accidents are extremely common in Fiji, as majority of the population does not wear seatbelts and road rules are not followed very well. As a result, we saw trauma cases from MVAs every single day. They ranged from relatively minor injuries like bruising or rib fractures to fatal and often involved several vehicles or drivers under the influence of alcohol. With each trauma case, I closely watched how well the team worked together and improvised in a low-resource setting. Bed curtains were limited in numbers so nurses often threw blankets or bedsheets over railing to ensure privacy for patients. In addition, the department had no tourniquets so interns had to improvise by using gloves or other material in order to collect blood. What shocked me the most was how difficult it was to maintain sterility during procedures. The department was extremely overcrowded and busy making it difficult to find the necessary space and equipment. The hospital is unable to afford disposable sterile dressing packs or drapes like in Australia and instead the doctors often re-usable sterilised equipment and cleaned the patients' skin as much as possible. Furthermore, the department was too small and overcrowded to provide isolation rooms for patients with infections such as tuberculosis, influenza or covid-19. Instead, these patients often sat in the waiting room with everyone else, most likely transmitting infections to one another. Witnessing all the above issues and limitations made me feel helpless and sad, as all of the above is readily accessible in Melbourne.



CWMH Operating Theatre

Over time, I got used to the department and its limited resources, which helped me not only appreciate the way doctors and nurses improvise to overcome them but also learn how to improvise myself. As the team got to know me, they allowed me to be involved in more procedures and activities which aided my learning. However, in my second week I began to notice another significant issue in Fiji that contributes to morbidity and mortality all around the country – poor health literacy. Unfortunately, majority of patients that arrive into the Emergency Department are in critical conditions, as they tend to disregard symptoms and avoid hospitals at all costs. This mostly stems from inadequate health literacy combined with mistrust in Western medicine. In Fijian, hospital is translated to ‘valenibula’, which has a very negative connotation and is often associated with a place of death. Thus, many Fijians rely on traditional healers or avoid healthcare altogether. This worsens outcomes in many aspects of health, but one that stood out to me the most was diabetes. According to Fiji Ministry of Health and Medical Services, 1 in 3 Fijians have diabetes and this number is likely to be underreported. As a consequence, approximately 40% of all surgeries performed in Fiji are diabetic amputations. Given that majority of Fijians work in agriculture or construction with very little access to healthcare, this statistic is extremely debilitating and serves as a major challenge for the country.



Lovo – a traditional Fijian fish dish cooked underground and wrapped in banana leaves.

Nevertheless, despite the numerous issues that Fijians face every day both in healthcare and in their daily lives, I think they are one of the loveliest and happiest people I have ever met. No matter where I went, I was always welcomed with the biggest smile and everyone was extremely grateful for my efforts even in moments where I felt helpless. The country itself was stunning with beautiful beaches, waterfalls and mountains. During my stay, I tried my best to immerse myself in their culture by learning about their traditional music, dances, history and trying local food. Overall, this trip was filled with many emotions, experiences and

lessons. I developed a huge appreciation for simple things that are usually taken for granted both in hospital and in my daily life, such as clean running water, air conditioning, EMR, good access to healthcare and safety on roads. Going back to a metropolitan hospital in Australia will definitely be an adjustment and an important reminder of how lucky I am both as a medical student and as a patient. In the future, I hope to come back to Fiji and volunteer again as a doctor when I have much more experience and knowledge and therefore can provide further assistance to those in need.

Thank you so much to the Andrew Dent Scholarship organisation for providing me with financial assistance and making this trip possible. I have gained invaluable experience and knowledge that I hope to share with others and expand in the future. I would also like to thank my supervisor and all of the emergency department staff for their support and care.



Assisting in the operating theatre



Local fruits and vegetables sold on the streets of Suva



A beautiful view seen from Suva Lami Bay



Colo-I-Suva Forest Park with waterfalls which are a very popular swimming spot for local children