

Clinical Elective Report: Exploring Healthcare in Vanuatu

As the holiday season brought cheer and anticipation, I embarked on a journey that would redefine my understanding of medicine and humanity. Nestled in the vibrant atmosphere of Christmas and the promise of a new year, I found myself at the Northern Provincial Hospital (NPH) in Vanuatu, ready to immerse myself in a world of healthcare unlike any I had experienced.

The program entails three weeks of navigating the bustling corridors of the Emergency Department, each day filled with new challenges and learning moments. I also had the opportunity to delve into the wards of Surgery and Maternity, each department offering its own set of insights and lessons. I am fortunate to have been supported by the Andrew Dent Student Elective Scholarship. This support allowed me to fully engage with the healthcare system in Vanuatu and walk alongside the dedicated healthcare providers.

My interest in rural and general medicine was cultivated during a prior elective in the Northern Territory. However, my time in Vanuatu enriched my understanding of the intricacies, challenges, and opportunities inherent in healthcare delivery within rural settings. Vanuatu, an archipelago situated in the South Pacific Ocean, comprises 83 islands and is home to approximately 300,000 people. Its remote and scattered geography, coupled with limited infrastructure, presents many obstacles to healthcare delivery.

In the Emergency Department, it became customary to inquire about the patients' island of origin—a stark departure from the suburban landscape of Australia. I observed firsthand that many patients travelled from remote corners of the island, heavily reliant on boats for access, while some were from locales accessible solely by foot. My time in the Emergency Department was a crash course in resourcefulness and adaptation. With limited resources and a constant influx of patients, healthcare providers navigated through each shift with teamwork and dedication. On one particular occasion, amid the cyclone season's torrential rains, our hospital grounds were besieged by flood and accompanied by an unexpected power outage. Outside, amongst the clamour of thunder and children's cries, staff hurried to protect equipment from water damage. Inside the mini-theatre, under the dim glow of our phones, two nurses and I attended to a patient with an open hematoma. Despite the chaos, the team had a remarkable sense of composure. We swiftly improvised, using additional fabrics to ensure the patient's comfort and gathering equipment to assess the extent of the injuries. Throughout the ordeal, the nurses were able to maintain a light-hearted atmosphere. Their gentle humour lifted spirits and instilled a sense of calm and trust in the patient. Amidst the storm raging outside, their reassuring presence made all the difference, ensuring that our patient felt safe despite the challenges.

One of the most impactful experiences I had was during my maternity rotations. Unlike in resource-rich settings like Australia, where specialised women's hospitals abound, NPH had only one obstetrician on site. Consequently, the bulk of guiding mothers through childbirth fell on the shoulders of midwives. This disparity in healthcare resources became glaringly

evident. In Vanuatu, cultural and logistical challenges often meant that women endured labour without access to advanced pain relief. Witnessing this firsthand was a stark reminder of the limitations in such settings. However, what I saw was genuinely humbling. Despite the absence of modern pain management techniques, the mothers and midwives exhibited remarkable strength. Drawing on their expertise, the midwives supported women through labour using breathing techniques and physical assistance. Though the methods may not have always been gentle, their unwavering presence provided a lifeline for the mothers as they faced the challenges of childbirth. Despite my initial reservations, I was moved by the incredible resilience the mothers and midwives showed. As I assisted in delivering newborns and conducted their initial checks, I experienced an overwhelming sense of life and vitality in the room. Yet, amidst the beauty of new life, I couldn't ignore the stark reality of limited options for pain management. I wondered if there are ways to bridge these gaps in healthcare resources and provide better support for mothers in similar situations.

Overall, the culture of Vanuatu is a tapestry woven with rich diversity and deep-rooted traditions. With over 100 languages spoken and Bislama serving as the English-based lingua franca, the linguistic landscape reflects the vibrant heritage of the Ni-Van people. Walking the streets of Vanuatu, total strangers greeted me with infectious joy, and warm smiles and friendly greetings made us feel very welcome and safe. In a crowded and poorly ventilated ward, where conditions would prompt complaints elsewhere, there was a prevailing sense of gratitude for the chance of receiving help. It was a reminder of positivity that permeated every aspect of life in Vanuatu.

Through the constant chaos of storms and the challenges of everyday life, a palpable faith in humanity anchored me. It was a reminder of the power of community and the strength that we can find in the bonds of society.



Photo1- preparing my first suture for the patient



Photo2 - the lovely ED staff threw us a farewell gathering in the staff room



Photo3 - spending the weekend at the scenic Matewulu blue hole with local families



Photo4 - Sharing the habitat with animal friends on the way to hospital