

Emergency Department Elective Tupua Tamasese Meaole Hospital Apia, Samoa

By Millie Baker

My medical elective at the Tupua Tamasese Meaole Hospital in Apia, Samoa, in December 2023, provided a valuable experience that expanded my medical skills, enriched my understanding of global health challenges, and offered insights into the unique cultural dynamics of the region. Samoa's natural beauty and welcoming community served as a backdrop for my two-week elective that combined hands-on medical learning with cultural appreciation and reflection on healthcare disparities.



☆ Me outside the ED. ☆



☆ RN Blessing Uelese and RN Tinomineta Tuaumu smiling after setting up the Christmas fairy lights in the ED. ☆

Christmas time was fast approaching and one could sense the excitement and festivity within the Emergency Department as the doctors and nurses decorated the office bay with fairy lights and told stories about their religious holiday traditions. Forming friendships and professional connections with the healthcare professionals in the department became a poignant aspect of my overall experience. The camaraderie between the staff members not only provided a welcoming learning environment for me, but also shed light on the immense dedication and resilience displayed by the healthcare team.

As we collaborated on patient care, the long and demanding hours became apparent. The nurses and junior doctors, in particular, demonstrated an unwavering commitment to their roles, often working well beyond standard shifts. Witnessing their dedication in the face of overwhelming demands left a profound impact on me. Despite the challenges, their passion for providing quality healthcare and ensuring the well-being of every patient was evident.



☆ Dr Derek Taylor, me, and RN Junior Tia'i. Dr Taylor was a huge mentor to me during the elective, I am very grateful for his guidance. ☆

The Emergency Department provided firsthand insights into the healthcare challenges faced by the Samoan population and healthcare system. Diseases such as type 2 diabetes, obesity, and rheumatic heart disease highlighted the necessity for comprehensive healthcare strategies. It wasn't uncommon to triage patients with blood sugar readings in the high 20s or 30s (normal <10 mmol/L) or see people with amputated legs due to poorly controlled diabetes. This made me appreciate the importance of health literacy, and the impact of the remoteness of Samoa in the Pacific Ocean with the accompanying prevalence of highly-processed packaged foods on sale in supermarkets. Witnessing the dedication of local healthcare professionals in the face of systemic challenges inspired in me a deeper commitment to addressing global health disparities and advocating for preventive measures that address such social determinants of health.



☆ Me suturing a real patient for the first time. ☆

Furthermore, participating in this elective significantly encouraged my personal and professional growth. Clinically, the Emergency Department provided me with the opportunity to revise a variety of different medical conditions and acquire essential skills such as wound suturing, cannula and catheter insertions, and interpreting X-ray images, ECGs and blood gas reports. Additionally, the doctors were not able to rely on blood test results when triaging and diagnosing patients, as such results would often take over five hours to return. Although challenging, this prompted me to focus on my clinical reasoning skills, and I learnt to effectively triage patients to identify which patients were well enough to be seen in the out-patient clinics, and which patients required urgent admission.

Aside from technical learnings, I also prioritised effective communication by learning key Samoan phrases such as “tiga” for “pain” and “manava i totonu” “manava i fafo” which means “breath in, breath out” to overcome language barriers, ease examinations and enhance patient comfort.



☆ Dancers at the Fiafia night, Le Manumea Hotel ☆

Beyond the four walls of the hospital, the natural beauty of the island of Upolu, Samoa, with pristine beaches, ocean trenches, waterfalls and lush greenery, served as a serene place to rest and explore on my off-days and afternoons. Engaging with the local community, from traditional ceremonies at the Samoan cultural centre, to sharing meals with families, deepened my appreciation for Samoa's rich culture. On my last night, I had the privilege of attending a traditional Samoan Fiafia night which showcased local cuisine, Pacific Island dances, and fire twirling, offering a vibrant conclusion to my time in this beautiful country.



☆ To Sua Ocean Trench ☆



☆ Sunset at Saletoga Sands Resort Beach ☆

I am immensely thankful to the Dent Family and the St Vincent's Hospital Pacific Health Fund Board for assisting healthcare students like me to embrace the unique opportunity to foster professional growth in the Pacific Islands. Witnessing the impactful work of the healthcare professionals at Tupua Tamasese Meaole Hospital has deepened my appreciation for Dr. Dent's commitment to supporting the training of Australian and Pacific colleagues. This experience has sparked my newfound passion for the health of our Pacific Islander neighbours, and I hope to return to Samoa in the near future.