

# Andrew Dent Scholarship Report

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Northern Provincial Hospital, Vanuatu – September and October 2023

Towards the end of 2023, and simultaneously the end of my medical studies, I travelled to Luganville, a regional town on the island of Espiritu Santo in Vanuatu, on a medical elective. Spending a month there, I had the opportunity to rotate through placements in surgery, obstetrics and gynaecology, paediatrics, and emergency medicine. Despite an earthquake, gastroenteritis, and a mid-air aeroplane engine malfunction, I saw unimaginably beautiful landscapes, met unfathomably kind and generous people, and witnessed an approach to medicine that improved the lives of the people of Vanuatu.



*Medical students James, Dan and I with Dr Mark Akoe outside Northern Provincial Hospital*

## Disease, diabetes, and debridement



*1 of 2 operating theatres operational during my time in Luganville*

The expectations of a visiting medical student to a tropical country are that they will witness little-known, understudied infectious diseases. This was not the case in Vanuatu. Instead, health detriment in Luganville centres around non-communicable diseases, most prominent of which is diabetes. Significant portions of Luganville's populace are subsistence farmers. Their meals are calorically rich but nutritionally deplete. Dinner on the island is often a small salad, a large steak, and an even larger serve of white rice. Breakfast can be a long roll of white bread drizzled with sugary conserve jam. Because of this, I would find myself sugar-crashing during the mid-morning ward round, flagging on a diet of high glycaemic index carbohydrates.

As a result of this diet, diabetes is prevalent and pervasive in Vanuatu. Poor health literacy compounds this. Presentations to the hospital are often delayed long past the point of the limb-salvaging debridements performed in Australia. Limb amputations, relatively uncommon in Australia, are a frequent recourse for the septic diabetic patient in Vanuatu.

Interestingly, the same socioeconomic disparities that drive diabetes in Australia are mirrored and magnified in Vanuatu. Access to healthcare is limited by cultural relationships with medicine, time-cost of health-seeking behaviours, and a paucity of health resources. The social determinants of health are, in this way, universal. Seeing these determinants writ large in Vanuatu will help inform my understanding of the factors driving health detriment in Australia.

## Healing, humility, and honey



*The rear of Northern Provincial; paediatrics ward to the right and obstetrics ward to the left*

Much is made about the difference between medicine in Western nations, and the medicine practiced elsewhere. A false dichotomy is established which inherently places “Western healthcare” above all else. While not deliberate, this view is often espoused by Australian teaching institutions that instruct medical students and doctors in training. Witnessing medical practice in other nations deconstructs this belief.

For example, the therapeutic relationship between the people of Vanuatu and honey. Honey is an often-used component of post-amputation wound dressings in Vanuatu. Honey, placed onto limb stumps and wrapped in gauze, is used to sterilise wounds and decrease wound healing time. This practice seems outlandish to Western medical sensibilities. Outreach-administered wound dressings performed in the patient’s home are a key component of Australian healthcare, but are an unaffordable luxury to the island of Espiritu Santo.

In an environment deficient of resources, both material and manpower, honey makes perfect sense. Patients are unlikely to present for review due to time-cost of medical care, as well as barriers related to health literacy. Fast and free access to antiseptic, wound reviews, and dressing changes in the community is non-existent. Maximising wound healing speed and minimising surgical site infection through other means is an obvious solution.

A Western view might intend to impose a new way of knowing and acting. In doing so, it would ignore the lived experience of doctors and other health professionals who have exposure to the austere post-surgical environment. As a visitor, it is important to remain humble, and understand the factors that necessitate alternate ways of practicing medicine. This same humility can be brought home, informing how I approach multi-disciplinary practice, the wishes of patients and family, and the unique views and values of Australia’s varied health landscape.

### **Work-ethic, weekends, and women's health**

One of the key differences that struck me between healthcare in Australia and in Vanuatu were the doctors themselves. In Australia, medicine is seen as a career or a job. While Australian doctors possess a sense of duty, resource abundance allows for peace of mind when it comes to unworked weekends, turned-down overtime, and necessary sick leave. In Australia, there is almost always someone else who could fill in, if need be.

Vanuatu doctors do not have access to such luxuries. Surgical registrars can work 7 days a week for months on end. The single obstetrics trainee is required to attend almost every delivery on an island with a population of 40 000. When situations become emergent and unmanageable for a trainee, there is only one consultant surgeon on the island who takes over the mantle of the true general surgeon, performing spinal decompressions in the same day as caesarean sections.



*On our way with the obstetrics team to a remote village for cervical cancer screening and treatment*

The doctors in Vanuatu had a sense of duty to their patients and the population of the island that I have never seen before and might never again. They would go above and beyond to provide the highest standard of care that they could. This would frequently come at the cost of self-care, personal relationships, and financial interests. Hardworking obstetricians and midwives would even make day trips to remote villages to ensure adequate cervical cancer surveillance was being provided to those unable to attend care themselves.

It is unjust that they must uphold this standard, and simultaneously admirable that they do. While it has its shortfalls, the Australian healthcare system provides extreme luxury when compared with the rigours faced by the doctors of Vanuatu. My elective placement informed me of the privilege I possess, as well as the responsibility I have to honour this privilege. If, in my own practice, I can demonstrate even a portion of these doctor's commitment, I will do my Australian patients a great service.

## Fun, friends, and football



*The end of Millenium Cave, shortly before floating down a canyon bordered by rainforest*

Up to this point, I've largely described Vanuatu through the lens of detriment. However, Vanuatu is rich in many things. Its landscapes, lagoons and beaches are some of the best in the world. Its festivals, feasts and religious celebrations are a joy to attend. Foremost, the Ni-Van people of Vanuatu are possibly the friendliest people alive.



*Impromptu park football match at La Plas in the Luganville town centre*

During my time in Vanuatu, I had the privilege of participating in impromptu park football matches, visits to the villages of gracious hosts, and dinners in the homes of local families. During this time, I felt welcomed despite being a newcomer to the island.



*The dining hall of my accommodation during my stay in Vanuatu*

My accommodation for the vast majority of the month was a family home-stay hosted by a prominent member of the local community. This home-stay was situated in Showgrounds, a district off the beaten track where the majority of the locals lived. I was invited to feasts and parties, and provided with local knowledge that helped avoid dangerous situations and seek out fantastic experiences.



*Million Dollar Point, a popular snorkelling spot home to Vanuatu's scuttled surplus from world war 2*

Bartering with friendly locals to snorkel off Million Dollar Point, hailing taxis to travel to azure lagoons, and eating laplap, nalo and cassava cooked by the 'market mamas' were all fun additions to my month of medical placements.

These activities and experiences highlighted a cultural difference between Vanuatu and Australia. While Australians can be suspicious and stand-offish, the people of Vanuatu are welcoming and warm. If I could import one thing from my stay, it would be this. At the very least, I hope to be as open and welcoming to my patients in the future as the doctors, nurses and locals of Vanuatu were to me.