

Andrew Dent Elective Scholarship Report

Tupua Tamasese Meaole Hospital, Samoa

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Introduction

In my final placement of my postgraduate medical degree, I had the incredible opportunity to complete an elective in Tupua Tamasese Meaole Hospital in Samoa. This placement was a 4-week experience of the psychiatric unit on the remote island of 200,000 people, and one psychiatrist. I was additionally fortunate for this experience, to have the sponsorship of the Andrew Dent Scholarship.

The following paragraphs share a brief snapshot of my experiences while in Samoa, the people, the culture, the medicine, and the lifestyle.

Psychiatry

When I mentioned to people that I was undertaking an elective in Samoa, the response was generally “Oh, that’s interesting”, then when I mentioned it was psychiatry, they grew more confused. But after going through this placement I can assuredly say that it was the right choice.

Psychiatry is a unique specialty, and especially in another country it provides more opportunity than other specialties to talk with patients, engage with and understand culture, and the challenges people face day to day.

In Samoa, there is one psychiatrist for the country. There is a two-bed inpatient psychiatric unit that is often over capacity, with additional beds being made on the floor to accommodate patients. The mental health clinic is in the same building and sees patients for everything from general health and welfare checks to cognitive assessments, and mental illness.



**Me (Isobel) and my friend
Esther enjoying a sunset in
Apia**

Samoa is a religious country, with about 98% percent of the population identifying as one of the Christian denominations. The attitudes towards mental health are improving, but many still see it as more of a spiritual than a medical issue. Mental health diagnoses cause embarrassment and shame for the families and often mental illness presents late. The psychiatry team in Samoa do a lot of education, travelling to villages to hold sessions for the people, holding lectures for the police and prison staff on how to manage patients with psychiatric conditions. Advocacy is a large part of the role here, and I was lucky enough to join in.



Me (Isobel) and local medical student Janice on an outreach trip

What I did

On a typical day on placement, I would arrive in the morning and review the inpatients. Other students on placement would often be there as well and we would discuss the cases and learning with one another. At the same time we would see patients in the outpatient clinic as they arrived and do the assessments to discuss with the consultant. Every day it was hands on work, with expectations to take responsibility for patients and their treatment.



Local medical students (Kiri, Janice, Eli and Alex), myself, and Dr George (psychiatrist) at the Samoan World

There are no psychologists in Samoa, so counselling falls under the purview of the mental health unit. Having had some previous experience, I would do short counselling and cognitive behavioural therapy with patients and education for them surrounding the illness and management strategies.

Each week we would also go on trips around the island. Sometimes to villages and join in health education sessions, sometimes we would travel to the prison to lecture on mental health for the staff there. One day we had an opening of a new kitchen at an accommodation facility for psychiatric patients where we met with German ambassadors who had donated the funds. I was even lucky enough to be in Samoa for World Mental Health Day where we celebrated with non-government organisations who worked in the space. We talked about experiences in all parts of the world, and the work being done to improve mental health and awareness in Samoa. Each person's contribution was valuable, and they were all making differences to progress mental health awareness and care.

Samoa Culture and Experiences

If I had to sum up Samoa in one word, I would say ‘family’. On our very first night, within two hours of arriving in the country, my friend and I were looking for a place to eat. We asked for directions and instead of just telling us where to go, we were given a ride. When we attended church, we went home with a family for lunch (that family included I’ u and Papa pictured on the right), then we were welcomed into that family. We attended church, youth group, birthday parties. We knew if we needed anything they would be there to help. “You are now a part of this family, whenever you are in Samoa”, said the father that first Sunday lunch - and we could feel that.

In Samoa, Christian beliefs are integrated with every aspect of society. In the hospital before lectures, before meals, we would open with prayer. From sunset on Saturday evening to sunset on Sunday, there would be the Sabbath, and nothing would be open aside from church. It made sightseeing difficult, but engaging with Church communities meant we were never missing out.

Samoa culture is centred around service; to each other, to the church, to visitors. The first time we sat down to a family lunch we found it difficult, because the family served us. They would not eat until we had finished out fill, then they would bring a bowl of water for us to wash out hands. Coming from the relaxed culture in Australia it felt unsettling, but it was the respect for visitors that they were embodying.

In addition to the wonderful families, and the interesting work, I had to of course do some sightseeing - and it was spectacular. Sometimes it was easy to get caught up in the day today, but you only had to drive a few minutes (or climb up a mountain) to be reminded you were on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Unlike Australia, there are very few dangerous animals, so hiking was fun and relaxed, as was swimming at waterfalls, with turtles and seeing blow holes on Savai’ i. The locals also all welcomed visitors and I had wonderful taxi drivers who made a fun tour guide around the island.

Final reflection

Before this rotation I had spent time on other pacific islands, I had even worked in resource poor settings, but in Samoa I found a unique sense of welcome. On placement I learnt about psychiatry, and the influence culture can have on it. From the people I learnt about family, and service. This rotation opened my eyes in so many ways,



Myself with friends I’ u, Papa and Angelo on my last night in Samoa



Angelo (Australian medical student) and I at Sopo’ aga Falls

gave me lifelong friendships and helped me in my skills and passion as a future doctor.