

Andrew Dent Scholarship Reflection: My Surgical Elective at Colonial War Memorial Hospital (CWMH), Fiji - By Frederick Gorman

Global health being a keen interest of mine, the end of my medical schooling led me to a two-week surgical immersion experience at Colonial War Memorial Hospital in Suva, Fiji. The day after our graduation last year, December 2023, another Deakin graduate, Lizzie Bartetzko and I flew to Fiji to experience the national surgical services. Additionally, another two Deakin students attended Lautoka Hospital at the same time. This opportunity was supported by the head of surgical teaching at Geelong Clinical School, who completed medical training in Fiji and regularly visits to conduct training of current surgical registrars. Overall, this was an extraordinary clinical experience for me, along with being extremely educational.

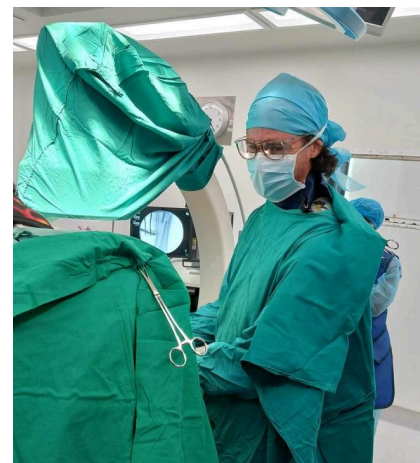


Healthcare Realities in Fiji

My experience at CWM Hospital was contrasted with my experience in Australian healthcare. Importantly different isn't always a negative. Due to Fiji's smaller population, the surgical registrars and consultants in Fiji are trained more broadly across all specialties than in Australia. This, combined with limited resources and accessibility, highlights the unique presentations and surgical procedures being performed. I saw a vast number of amputations, which were a result of long-term diabetes complications and every Christmas period, boys aged 6-14 go through cultural circumcision, which results in a vast number of circumcisions being performed. The equipment was quite basic, and much of it consisted of donations from Australia and New Zealand. Many hospital factors affect healthcare as well, staff limitations, especially during the Christmas period. The wards were overcrowded and hot, lacking air conditioning. These conditions really highlighted the healthcare realities in Fiji. Despite these differences, the surgical team's dedication to patient care and undertaking the complexity of these operations with limited resources was very impressive.

Hands-On Learning in Surgery

Despite these challenges, my time in the operating rooms was incredibly hands-on and valuable. Given the hospital was staff shortages, my presence as a student was helpful, and I was given more opportunities than I would have had in Australia. This level of direct involvement significantly accelerated my learning and practical skills development. I regularly sutured, stapled, cut, sawed, along with retracting. I assisted in a few bowel resections, mostly palliative



surgical interventions over curative treatments. There was a high number of trauma patients and several open reduction internal fixations (ORIFs) and laceration repairs. I also had the opportunity to assist in a discectomy and a laminectomy.

A major part of my surgical experience involved toe, foot and lower limb amputations and surgical circumcisions, as mentioned before. I assisted in over 10 amputations. This showed me the serious consequences of chronic disease in a system with limited preventative care. Ultimately, I was able to perform the initial steps of a below-knee amputation, incision, dissection and bone cutting, with a registrar assisting. This was a mix of professional development and an awareness of the profound impact on this patient's life. I also assisted in over 30 circumcisions. Given the cultural significance, I was honoured to perform some independently under supervision. This gave me valuable procedural skills and a unique insight into Fijian culture.



Cultural Immersion Beyond the Hospital

Beyond the hospital, I found every single Fijian to be very happy and the most welcoming people. The hospital staff were friendly and made me feel at home. We were invited to weekend beach luncheons, schoolboy rugby presentation nights, Christmas staff lunches, celebrations and nights out with the surgical team. We were continually fed in the hospital by the nursing team, and when visiting community events were always well looked after. We conducted this trip over the Christmas period, and Lizzie and I were also able to visit the Coral Coast for a few days. Soaking up the sun in paradise. These trips provided a different perspective from the busy hospital and allowed me to appreciate some truly stunning landscapes. I also felt so welcomed into the wider Fijian culture and community.



Key Takeaways and Future Aspirations

This two-week elective was transformative. It opened my eyes to the realities of healthcare in the Pacific Islands, completely different from what I know in Australia. I experienced global disparities in healthcare and healthcare access. I was able to see the remarkable dedication required to deliver care with limited resources. I am grateful for the warm welcome from patients, staff, and the Fijian people. I gained useful surgical skills and learned important lessons about dedication to providing care no matter the circumstances. Being able to contribute and be useful in this environment was very rewarding.

This experience has broadened my understanding of medicine beyond my university studies. It has given me a deep appreciation for our public healthcare system and a true appreciation of how important access to healthcare is. This trip has further highlighted to me that although in Australia we have world-class healthcare, given our significant distances, it can be extremely challenging for people to access that care. It has given me a profound respect for those working in more challenging conditions. I strongly recommend this type of placement to other students and clinicians. I hope to return to Fiji one day as a qualified surgeon to give back to the community that gave me so much.

Finally, I will take this experience forward into my clinical practice to better understand each patient's own story. Bula Vinaka! (Fijian greeting translating to Good Health)