

Andrew Dent Scholarship Report – Vila Central Hospital, Vanuatu

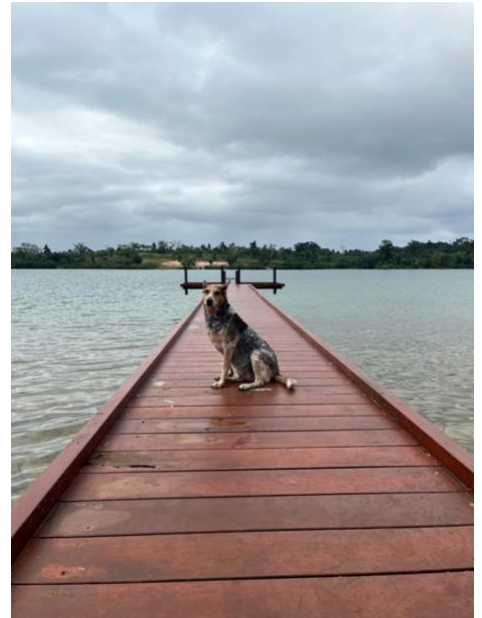
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From May to June 2024, I embarked on a four-week elective at Vila Central Hospital (VCH) in Port Vila, accompanied by a fellow medical student. The elective provided hands-on clinical experience and invaluable insight into global health challenges, while allowing me to appreciate Vanuatu's breathtaking natural landscapes and rich cultural diversity.

Getting to Vanuatu

The elective began with an unexpected challenge. Two weeks before our scheduled departure to Santo Island (our initial elective location), Air Vanuatu went into liquidation, leaving us unable to reach our destination. Fortunately, some of my medical school peers had recently returned from VCH and helped us to re-schedule our elective to VCH on short notice.

Despite this setback, we safely arrived in Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, in mid-May. Upon arrival, we were greeted by the warm hospitality of the locals and the tropical climate. We settled into our accommodation, Seachange Lodge, a nice quiet lodge near the hospital, hosted by the kind-hearted Ian and Oli (and their dog, Missy).



Missy – the local house dog at Seachange Lodge

Emergency Medicine

Our elective started in the Emergency Department (ED), which was predominantly run by nurses with support from a foreign aid ED doctor from Australia and occasionally a local doctor. I independently assessed and managed patients, gradually learning some Bislama (the local language) along the way, and performed simple procedures like venepuncture and cannulation. It was quite striking to see the limited resources available in the ED. Essential supplies, such as gloves and alcohol swabs, had to be used sparingly. Blood tests took many hours to return and x-ray and ultrasound were the only imaging modalities available, making clinical diagnosis extremely important. One case that stood out to me involved a young woman with a suspected ruptured ectopic pregnancy. She was critically ill, hypotensive and tachycardic, requiring urgent surgical intervention. Unfortunately, she remained in the ED for nearly 6 hours before surgery, and post-operative complications necessitated another operation shortly afterward. This case underscored the need for increased funding and support to improve patient safety in resource-limited settings like Vanuatu.



Me in front of an ambulance outside VCH ED

Internal Medicine

Our next rotation was Internal Medicine, which was set in a 40-bed ward with less than optimal hygiene conditions. The highlight was ward rounds with Dr Sale, a passionate Ni-Vanuatu internal medicine specialist. I witnessed numerous clinical signs and conditions that I had only read about in textbooks such as Keratoderma blennorrhagicum in reactive arthritis, pre-tibial myxoedema and thyroid bruits in Graves' disease, Norwegian scabies and several cases of rheumatic heart disease. Under the supervision of Dr Wang, a respiratory specialist from China, I assisted in performing a pleural tap on a patient with significant pleural effusion secondary to malignancy. We drained over a litre of fluid using a single 50ml syringe.



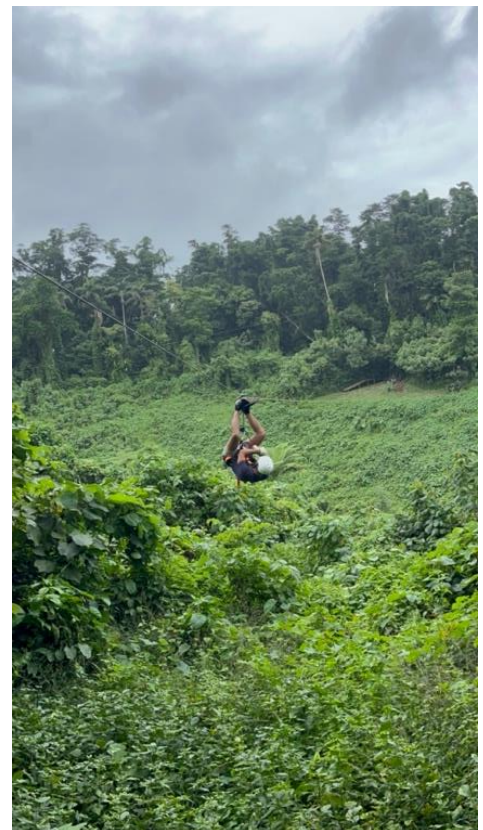
Performing a pleural tap on the ward

Whilst these clinical experiences were invaluable, it was evident that patients often presented late in the disease course due to low levels of health literacy and limited access to healthcare services. It was especially disheartening to see patients with newly diagnosed malignancy with no treatment options available locally, with surgery needing to be performed in other countries like India.

Adventure, Tours & Trivia Night

Beyond the hospital, we explored the stunning scenery of Vanuatu through tours run by locals. We visited the Blue Lagoon, Rarru falls, Iririki island resort, Eden on the River and Lelepa islands, each offering a unique glimpse into Vanuatu's natural beauty. We also took on the Jungle Zipline which was exhilarating and provided a thrilling adrenaline rush. Our host at Seachange Lodge, Ian, invited us to a weekly Trivia night at the local sports bar which was always competitive and enjoyable. Our final night featured a memorable fire show at the Beach Bar, another highlight of our trip. Throughout all our experiences, what stood out the most was the people of Vanuatu. Their positivity, kindness and support made a lasting impression and are a significant reason why I would love to return in the future.

It was a privilege to undertake my elective in Vanuatu and I am immensely grateful for the support of the St Vincent's Hospital Pacific Health Fund. I strongly recommend this elective to medical students, especially those that are passionate about global health, for the incredible learning opportunities and enriching cultural experiences.



Upside down on the jungle zipline