

Elizabeth Robinsshaw – Medical Elective in Tobago, Summer 2014

I chose to spend my medical elective in Scarborough General Hospital in Tobago. Tobago is a small island in the Caribbean, one of the two islands of the country Trinidad and Tobago. I decided to go there because it was an English speaking country and because it has recently had a boost to its economy by the discovery of oil reserves so I was interested to see how they were managing the public health aspects of this new prosperity.

I had planned to spend my seven weeks in a general medical ward or the accident and emergency department. There was not space for me in either of those departments so I was placed in obstetrics and gynaecology.

The T&T government has increased spending in healthcare recently. The hospital is brand new with good facilities and is excellently staffed, with far more doctors and nurses than I have seen in the NHS. There was a shortage of Caribbean trained doctors so they have recruited from all over the world. On the O&G ward, for example, there were several Nigerian doctors.



The knowledge of these doctors and nurses was excellent. The protocols and treatment regimens were very similar to the UK ones, and with the exception of several American blood test names it was very much like being on the O&G ward in Hinchinbrooke.

However there were some aspects of my experience that were markedly different. The role of doctors was far more paternal, communication skills were in some cases non-existent. The professionalism that we are so diligently taught and required to reflect on was in some cases lacking. This was especially evident in the way that nurses and doctors interacted, and the lack of teamwork I sometimes observed. It was fairly routine for the doctor to invite all 6 medical students on the ward and his house officer in to observe an intimate examination with barely any attempt at patient consent. There was also a laparoscopic operation I attended where the anaesthetist was in charge of taking pictures of the screen with his phone as there was no still shot option available on the equipment. I was unsure as to the potential data sharing/confidentiality issues this raised.

The wider outlook on healthcare was different too, with public health aspects of the adult population seeming to be unaddressed. Obesity, hypertension and type II diabetes are hugely prevalent in T&T but I couldn't see any coordinated public health campaigns to tackle these. There is also less screening – no breast or cervical smear programme.

The cultural and moral standpoint of the population also affects the healthcare. There is little to no provision of sexual education and abortion is illegal. Yet mifepristone is accessible over the counter and contraception is free. There were patients who would be coming to the O&G ward every few months with incomplete miscarriages from self-abortion with over the counter mifepristone yet either no one would discuss contraception with them or they did not want any. There is also a tradition of alternative medicine, witch doctors and superstition. Most of the doctors I observed approached this with a live and let live attitude but one or two were actively dismissive with the patients, which was perhaps unhelpful but may have prevented them using ineffective treatment in preference to evidence based treatment.

Blood donation is also not a done thing in Tobago. Before having an elective surgery patients were supposed to get 4 members of their friends and family to donate on their behalf, but when I was there the majority of people had either no donors or just one. This led to a situation where the blood bank had only one unit of O- blood for O&G elective operations that day and so most had to be delayed.

The most memorable event from my elective was a rather harrowing elective caesarean section which took roughly 20 minutes from opening the uterus to delivering the baby. Thankfully the child was fine but having only seen straightforward caesareans before it made me aware of the potential difficulties.

I didn't enjoy the style of teaching practised in Tobago. There was a lot more of the teaching by humiliation than I have experienced in East Anglia but I have to admit that it was very effective as a motivational tool!

Reading all of the above makes my experience sound rather negative. It really wasn't! The patients and doctors were wonderfully welcoming and helpful. I practised clinical skills and it was very useful to get used to taking blood and inserting cannulas into darker skin. I saw pathology that is uncommon in the UK and very much enjoyed the layout of a hospital in an environment where cold weather is not a problem!

Recommendation

An elective in the Caribbean provides an opportunity to experience an environment that currently lies between a very Westernised approach to healthcare and the very primitive delivery of aid that some students experience on their electives. I was able to revise and see examples of importantly recognisable cases such as sickle cell crises, yet still experience occasions such as all of the ward nurses starting the day by standing in a circle singing gospel hymns!

Undoubtedly I would recommend an elective placement in Tobago. The days in the hospital were supplemented by visits to picturesque beaches and waterfalls; drives thorough the rainforest and the sampling the local delicacies of crab, goat and fresh coconuts. It provided me with a fantastic opportunity to put my clinical skills into action whilst simultaneously learning about the existence of different approaches and attitudes to relatively similar diseases and health problems that we experience in the UK.

Practical points:

Make sure to get organised early – both in terms of contacting hospitals and then booking flights. It's better to try and contact the hospitals as an individual rather than through some of the large commercial organisations. Also remember that College do offer travel grants which may help with some of the costs incurred. It's also worth (if possible) getting in contact with any other students who have previously visited a hospital; first hand advice and opinions are fantastically useful.