

Jamie King – Medical elective in Santiago de Cuba, Summer 2013

Nine weeks of my summer was spent in Santiago de Cuba on my medical elective. I wanted to go to somewhere Spanish speaking to make use of my Spanish language skills that I had spent previous summers developing in Spain. I chose Cuba because I have been interested in its modern revolutionary history for some years and was intrigued to see what the resultant, world renowned health care system was really like.

Upon arriving in Cuba the first challenge was trying to understand what was probably the most difficult to comprehend accent I've heard in Spanish. Further challenges included trying to understand the dual currency system and learning to filter out the many pestering comments and questions shouted at me in the street for being so obviously non-Cuban.

Having landed in Havana, it was a 14 hour bus journey to Santiago on the other end of the island, where I would complete my elective. After reading about the emphasis placed on health promotion and disease prevention in Cuba and the wide accessibility of family doctors, I decided to spend the first three weeks in primary care. It was during these three weeks I learnt about their national program for primary attention, which includes every person in Cuba being visited by a doctor at least once a year as part of their emphasis on disease prevention and health promotion. The remaining four weeks I spent in a paediatric hospital mainly in accident and emergency. Here I saw a lot of acutely ill children and witnessed how the skilled doctors examined and managed them with much fewer resources than we have here. This provided a great opportunity to see doctors making decisions based more on clinical signs and judgement and less on test results.

The thing that impressed me most of the elective was discovering the great awareness and knowledge of health and disease of the general public. Whether this is the result of the emphasis on health promotion since the revolution or something that has been part of their culture for much longer, I don't know, but I was very impressed by the understanding patients had when they spoke to doctors and gave their history.

I had the opportunity to gain many experiences including examining acutely ill children, performing certain clinical skills and, of course, practicing and improving my Spanish. I am therefore very grateful to Pembroke College and the Panton Trust Fund for their generous contribution towards the cost of this very valuable experience for me.