

Richard Heywood- Medical elective, Christchurch (New Zealand)- June/July 2014

As part of the medical course in Cambridge, we are able to spend a period of 5 weeks studying any area of medicine of our choosing, at any hospital in the world, so I chose to go to Christchurch in New Zealand where I decided to spend my time studying Haematology (the study of diseases of the blood).

The Haematology department in Christchurch is the largest on the South Island of New Zealand and acts as a tertiary referral centre for the entire island (i.e. patients are referred there from other hospitals for specialist treatment). The department consists of a ward, a bone marrow transplant unit, an outpatients department and several specialist laboratories.

During my placement I was able to combine clinical work (seeing patients on the wards and in clinics), and work in the laboratory. The clinical component involved looking after patients on the wards; lots of these patients had received chemotherapy, and had side effects such as diarrhoea, vomiting and susceptibility to infection which all needed to be managed.

The laboratory component involved looking at blood samples and bone marrow samples under the microscope, and performing specialist tests such as flow cytometry (looking at markers on the surface of cells that help identify abnormal cells), cytogenetics (using probes to look at abnormalities of chromosomes and genes that identify certain types of disease) and molecular pathology (sequencing DNA to check for abnormalities).

There are a fascinating array of conditions that are managed by a haematologist; most of these are blood cancers such as leukaemia, lymphoma and myeloma, but there are also other conditions that are seen such as anaemia, haemophilia and other coagulopathies (where blood does not clot enough leading to excessive bleeding), pro-thrombotic diseases (where the blood clots too easily, potentially causing strokes, deep vein thrombosis and kidney disease), and many rarer diseases! Haematology is a very satisfying field of medicine as many of these conditions, which would otherwise be fatal, can be well controlled by drug therapy.

I thoroughly enjoyed being part of the department in Christchurch; the entire team were friendly and welcoming and made me feel part of the team, and I was able to help out with many tasks which will prove valuable in years to come as a junior doctor.

In addition to working in the hospital, I was also able to travel around New Zealand, which is an incredible country and one which I would recommend that everybody tries to visit at some point. I was able to go for walks in the mountains, experience an enormous array of wildlife (swimming with dolphins was a highlight!), and explore lakes and glaciers. The only downside was Christchurch itself, which is still reeling from the large earthquakes in 2010 and 2011 and has virtually no city centre; however, signs of recovery are being seen so in years to come it will hopefully be a better place to visit.

This placement was a very valuable experience, which allowed me to explore an area of medicine that is fascinating but which we do not get to experience as medical students in the UK. It is an area of medicine that I was already interested in pursuing, and this elective has re-enforced that belief. I am very grateful to Pembroke College and the Panton Trust fund for supporting me in this elective by contributing money towards the cost of my flights.