

Chris Ramsden –Elective, Scarborough General Hospital, Tobago, 2014

Where I went, and why

I spent my seven-week elective period on the island of Tobago, part of the country of Trinidad and Tobago. I was placed at the island's only hospital, Scarborough General, which is situated in the island's capital city. The island itself is home to approximately 60,000 people, and is significantly smaller than its neighbour Trinidad, which has a population of 1.3 million people. I stayed in a village named Castara, some 40 minutes away from the hospital by car. A map of the island is reproduced below:



I wanted to visit Tobago for several reasons. Firstly, I had never been to the Caribbean area before, and had wanted to travel there for some time. Secondly, being a very small island, I was interested to see how clinical medicine was practised and what the resources would be like. I was also hoping to be able to become fully involved in the team to which I was assigned (internal medicine) and learn the differences

between our medical system and that in Tobago.

What I planned to do, and what I actually did

My plan was to spend seven weeks working on the internal medicine ward, which is - rather unsurprisingly - what I did. I was working with a consultant called Dr. Okeke, and his team of juniors rotated several times during my attachment. The working day started at 08:00 and involved a mixture of ward rounds, clinics and general assistance on the ward. Unfortunately, the biggest disappointment of my elective was that Tobago seems to be a very popular destination for students: I was there with three friends from Cambridge, and a substantial group of around 20 students also arrived from Queens, Belfast. As the hospital was relatively small, there were far too many students for the number of doctors and patients present - meaning that my clinical experience was necessarily reduced. Nonetheless I was able to become a part of the clinical team, and enjoyed answering the testing questions put to me by Dr. Okeke and getting to know the ward's patients very well over the weeks.



The experiences I gained

The most striking experience was how similar clinical medicine in Tobago was to that in the UK. The hospital was much like a smaller version of the newer areas of English hospitals and the hierarchical system was nearly identical, albeit with different names for some of the grades. Ward

rounds and clinics were carried out in basically the same way, and management schemes for conditions encountered in both locations involved many of the same therapies. One significant difference involved the conditions encountered: Tobago has higher rates of hypertension and diabetes mellitus (believed to be due to a combination of genetics and poor diet), and correspondingly there is a high incidence of cardiovascular disease, cerebrovascular disease and renovascular disease. Indeed, the hospital – although very small – has a specialised renal service and is in the process of building cath labs. Moreover, there was a noticeably higher prevalence of infective endocarditis and sickle cell disease, two diseases that we learn a great deal about as part of our pathology course but actually encounter quite infrequently.

Another experience was that of a different focus of the doctor-patient relationship. Here in the UK the focus is obviously one of joint decision-making, with the doctor and patient both contributing to their management plan. In Tobago, there is still a relatively paternalistic approach to the doctor-patient relationship, with doctors frequently issuing instructions to patients without involving the latter in the plan. Although this frequently made me cringe – especially after our quite intense communication skills training – some patients seemed not to particularly mind and often appeared happy to be passive in their care. However, a significant minority of patients seemed somewhat overwhelmed by the one-way dialogue, and clearly would have liked to have more input or more answers.

Did my elective meet my expectations?

I would have preferred more clinical experience from my elective, and I feel somewhat unfortunate that there were so many elective students in the hospital. Nevertheless, I had a great experience of the healthcare system of a very different society, and by the end of my placement I felt like I had a very good understanding of the way clinical medicine is practised on the island. Tobago itself, however, lived up to my expectations completely, being an incredibly picturesque island with stunning scenery and outstanding natural beauty. The locals colloquially know Tobago as “paradise”, and it is hard to argue with their assessment!

The single most memorable event of my elective

Obviously this is a very difficult decision to make, but I think the most memorable was probably going fishing in the sea and catching plenty of tuna, which we then ate for dinner. Although this has absolutely nothing to do with medicine, it was a great experience nonetheless!

What I did not enjoy

I have already mentioned the over-crowdedness of the hospital with respect to the number of students present, which was obviously not preferable. I was also not hugely fond of the biting insects that found us so tempting! However, the least enjoyable element was certainly our journey home, which – due to a monumental set of mistakes by British Airways – saw us delayed for nearly 48 hours and forced us to spend a day in a horrible hotel in Antigua without any local currency. Not the best way to end such an excellent few weeks...!