

## Hannah Marcarian – Medical Elective in the Caribbean, Summer 2017

For my elective, I chose to go to the Caribbean, as I wanted to experience a healthcare system that was less well resourced, but also wanted to work in English speaking countries. I spent four weeks in St Vincent and three weeks in St Lucia. St Vincent gave me a very authentic Caribbean experience, whereas St Lucia was a lot more touristy.

I spent two weeks working in A&E in Milton Cato Memorial Hospital in St Vincent. I expected a lack of resources but was still surprised by the challenges the hospital faced in that respect. There were no thrombolytic drugs and if a patient came in with a stroke, the approach was to 'trust in God'. My practical skills were challenged too; I was asked to put a cannula in for one of the patients, but there were no small cannulae available to do this with. There were no tourniquets and we had to use gloves as a makeshift replacement. Rather than alcohol wipes, there was a tub of cotton wool balls soaked in the 85% Sunset rum that we were supposed to use to clean the area. The problems we saw in A&E were not too different from those we see in the UK. We saw a lot of poorly controlled hypertension and diabetes, and in the streets you would pass many amputees. I was surprised at the carefree attitude patients had towards these diseases. We also saw a lot of sickle cells patients, a disease I had never seen in the UK.

After two weeks on A&E I switched to paediatrics. On the ward there was no air conditioning and we were expected to wear white coats. You never fully got used to the heat! Here we were expected to attend a ward round with a consultant and the interns, and then repeat the ward round with the same doctors plus another consultant who came in later. You really had to push to hear what was going on, as there were so many students, but if you showed enthusiasm and asked questions then the doctors were very happy to teach you. I attended some outpatients clinics whilst on paediatrics too. These were very different to clinics in the UK. There were often two doctors seeing separate patients in the same room, and the attitude of the doctors to the patients was very paternalistic. In one of the clinics I saw a baby with spina bifida awaiting surgery. His mother had to raise the equivalent of £1000 in order to take him to Barbados for the surgery as it could not be done in St Vincent. It shocked me to hear that the hospital did not even have a neurologist.

St Vincent is a beautiful country and I would definitely recommend it as an elective destination. In our free time we explored the island; we climbed the volcano, visited the Dark View Falls, the locations where The Pirates of the Caribbean films were filmed and the botanic gardens. We also visited Bequia, one of the Grenadine islands, which has beautiful white sand beaches.

I spent the next three weeks in St Lucia, on the paediatrics ward in Victoria Hospital. There were about twenty of us UK students in the hospital in total. The hospital seemed slightly more resource rich than Milton Cato. However, they still lacked certain resources and would have to send patients to other islands or the USA for many procedures, for example, there was a nine-year-old girl with a spinal tumour who had to go to Martinique for a spine MRI.

I also spent a couple of days in the Primary Care section of A&E in Victoria Hospital. Here I basically acted as a GP, clerking patients on my own and then

presenting to a doctor. This was really useful as I got to practice my history taking and examination skills under time constraints, as there were so many patients.

St Lucia is another beautiful Caribbean island. In our free time we (attempted) to climb the Gros Piton (I managed to get  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way up), visited the sulphur springs, mudbaths and waterfall, and spent time on the stunning white sand beaches.

I thoroughly enjoyed my elective and would definitely recommend the hospitals to other students.