

Jon Whitby (Clinical Medicine) – Antigua, June 2015

Mount St. John's Medical Centre in Antigua became my elective destination by chance as much as choice. I had wanted to visit the Caribbean for many years and so emailed several hospitals on different English-speaking islands, it just so happened that the team in Antigua were the first and only to reply, and even then after several weeks delay. I chose to spend four weeks in the hospital studying paediatrics.

The island itself is very small, at 14 miles long by 11 miles wide, with a population of just 80 000 (by contrast Cambridge has a population of around 125 000). While doing research the impression I got was of a highly developed country with stunning natural beauty as well as luxury tourist resorts and large holiday homes built by the rich and famous. While this is certainly true of small parts of the coastline, much of the population lives in townships in the centre of the island, and in the capital city St John's.

Land ownership is seen as important to Antiguan and so most people had a house of their own, though often simply built of wood and not necessarily with running water or other amenities. My apartment was in a township on the outskirts of St John's and very modern in comparison to its neighbours, with satellite TV, Wi-Fi and fortunately air conditioning (even in the rainy season the temperature was a fairly constant 27°C day and night). The owners were a mother and daughter, Consuelo and Shirmique, who had a background in the hospitality industry and had recently built the apartment block from the ground up. They were incredibly accommodating and friendly, always eager to know how I was enjoying my stay, and happy to recommend things to do on the island.



Mount St John's Medical Centre was the only hospital on the island, found on a hill overlooking St John's harbour. Small by UK standards with only 180 beds, it nonetheless had departments covering most major medical specialties. On my first morning I reported to the paediatric ward to find that there were only two patients; I had overlooked the fact that it would be school summer holidays when I arrived, and children do not, on the whole, get ill when out of school. As a result I spent much of my time on the neonatal intensive care unit, helping to care for infants born as much as three months prematurely. I was welcomed into the team, and with only seven doctors, was given a lot of responsibility in making decisions about the patients' care.



The unit had most of the equipment required to run safely and smoothly, although it was often more rudimentary than that I am accustomed to, and in some cases entirely makeshift. The main difficulties faced by the medical team were lack of specialist paediatric surgeons and technicians to perform scans, as well as a shortage of much needed medications. Shipments of drugs were very unpredictable and so occasionally patients simply had to go without; this could be life threatening if there were no suitable antibiotics

available. One of the more difficult situations arose when two babies were born with breathing difficulties, and there was only enough of a potentially life saving drug to treat one child; fortunately in this case both recovered well. The medicine on the whole was similar to that I had seen in the UK, and so the most important lessons I learnt were regarding resource allocation and how to best make use of money and medications available; decisions which rarely have to be made in the NHS.



With the island being so small I was able to travel and see much of it in my short time there. Much of the island's historical buildings date to the 18th Century, when the island was occupied by the British Navy, and African slaves were transported to work on sugar plantations, and many of these buildings have been restored for the benefit of British tourists. Most of my leisure time, however, was spent on one or other of Antigua's beaches, with the locals claiming that you could visit a different one every day of the year. My local beach, aptly named Runaway Beach, was a favourite with the locals, and I never saw another tourist in my month there, only Antiguan's enjoying the sun, sea and sand.

The concept of 'Island Time' is no myth, and nobody on the island ever seemed to be in a rush; while this was initially frustrating, and quite unnerving in acute situations in the hospital, by the end of my stay it became all too easy to spend the whole day doing nothing at all, and I was shocked by the change in pace when arriving back in Heathrow Airport. Antigua is a beautiful island, full of kind and friendly people, and I would encourage anyone with the opportunity to visit to do so.