

Peter Fletcher - Medical Elective 2017 Sri Lanka

My elective consisted of six week placement at Kandy general hospital and one week in a local orthopaedic clinic which provided more traditional treatments. Whilst in Sri Lanka I was also lucky enough to visit and experience a variety of the country and culture; this including climbing Sri Pada mountain and viewing Kandy Perahera festival, as well as spending some time on the very pleasant coastline.

Sri Lanka has a large private healthcare system, however, this is beyond the means of many of the population. This being so, the government funded facilities are very busy, as are the tertiary centres providing traditional - Ayurvedic - medicine. I visited one of these Ayurvedic centres for one week and found it very interesting. The treatments offered were more simplistic; splints for 'fractures' and back braces for 'slipped discs' were the most common, with herbal (bark and oil) treatments also contributing. These treatments seemed logical; although there was perhaps some over diagnosis and the recovery times were longer than those found from hospital based medicine. However, the patients were all extremely happy with the service and many came back repeatedly. This medicine was also quite cheap, which may be one of the biggest driving factors as to why it was the preference for many.

In the hospital I spent time in neurosurgery, cardiothoracic surgery and orthopaedic surgery. The clinics operated on a first come first serve basis, with patients self-referring. There was an incredible demand for these services, with many patients travelling miles overnight, to sleep in nearby corridors, thus ensuring that they would be seen the following day. I regularly walked into overflowing waiting rooms, roll mats strewn across floor space and the smell of traditional breakfast savoury pastries in the air (almost masking some less pleasant odours). In a single morning clinic up to 250 patients would be seen in a clinic of 3 juniors, with the more serious cases being taken up to the single consultant.

Perhaps due in part to the limited availability of healthcare, a reliance of traditional treatments, a remarkable stoic attitude and tolerance of pain, or simply due to economic factors, many of the patients would present late in their illnesses. This made treatments and the allocation of resources to those most in need particularly difficult. The treatments and surgery offered were in large very similar to those in the UK. What was evident was that there was a great deal of effort put in to reducing costs. There were very few one-use items; from the slight staining on the theatre gowns to the absence of sterile light handles, it was clear that a great deal of effort was made to minimise waste. Of particular note was the first heart transplant ever in Sri Lanka, which was performed whilst I was placed on the cardiothoracic unit and was very successful.

Of course there were a number of situations that were completely unfamiliar. Firstly I had to take a number of precautions to protect myself from dengue fever, which is currently in pandemic in the south east of the country. There were also many unique cases including; obstruction of the small intestine due to impacting worms, a particularly massive paediatric hydrocephalus and a very unfortunate and surprising number of people who suffered spinal injuries after falling from trees.

Overall my time in Sri Lanka was thoroughly enjoyable and was an opportunity to experience a very different system of healthcare, as well as some quite unique conditions. The country and its people were very pleasant and welcoming. I would highly recommend a future elective here.