

Surgical Adventures in South East Asia

My Medical Elective in Thailand and the Philippines – James Cullen

Throughout medical school we hear all about the tales of elective, the 7-week period between 5th and 6th year where medical students can go anywhere in the world to experience medicine somewhere very different from what we are used to in the UK. It is a major rite of passage on the way to becoming a doctor, and this summer I finally had my chance to embark on this adventure myself. I took the opportunity to travel to South East Asia (much farther from home than I had ever ventured), spending 4 weeks in Thailand and 3 weeks in the Philippines. During this time I experienced a range of different specialties, with a particular focus on surgery; I was also able to spend time travelling and exploring while outside the hospital. This was without a doubt the greatest opportunity of my medical career so far, and has hugely influenced my future career plans and also my perspective on global health.

I began my elective by travelling to Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand with another medical student, where we spent 4 weeks in the Maharaj Nakorn hospital, a large hospital serving much of northern Thailand and even parts of nearby Myanmar. I spent my first 2 weeks on the neurosurgery unit, where I had the opportunity to assist on many operations on the brain, including tumour resections, haematoma removals and vascular bypasses. I was able to assist in many parts of these operations, particularly improving my suturing skills. As the hospital is a major trauma centre, we saw many cases of traumatic brain injury from around the region, particularly as a result of Thailand's treacherous roads. We had many severe brain injuries from victims of car and motorcycle accidents, and I joined several emergency operations (some at night) to attempt to save their lives; many of these were successful, and I watched over the following weeks as these patients slowly recovered on the intensive care unit.

My next 2 weeks were spent on the cardiothoracic surgery unit, where I watched lots of intricate cardiac surgery; particularly interesting was the heart surgery on very young babies and children, some of them only days old. It was an incredible experience to watch life-saving corrective heart surgery on these tiny patients, many of whom would have died very quickly without intervention. The operating theatre was an exciting and, at times, very stressful environment. Stopping a child's heart for an hour while attempting to fix the structural defects, while a machine replaced the function of the heart and lungs, was something I had never quite experienced before. Restarting the heart was terrifying – I was able to use the internal defibrillator paddles to shock the heart directly (fortunately it was successful every time). Watching these children recover after surgery was immensely rewarding.

Outside of the hospital, we spent time exploring the ancient city of Chiang Mai, famous for its temples, markets and street food. One weekend we climbed a mountain to visit a golden temple at the summit, and explored some of the vast jungle surrounding the city. We also visited an elephant sanctuary, and learned the arts of Thai cooking and Muay Thai boxing. We spent a weekend in the enormous city of Bangkok, where we explored more landmarks, such as the enormous Grand Palace.

We then flew to the Philippines where we spent 3 weeks in the central province of Cebu. We worked in Cebu Doctors' University Hospital, a private hospital in Cebu City; I spent 1 week on internal medicine and 2 weeks on surgery. On this placement I saw many patients with tropical diseases I had never experienced before, particularly dengue fever. I also witnessed first-hand the impact of the private healthcare system on the patients. The Philippines is a resource-limited country, and so the government provides very little by way of free healthcare. On my first day, I saw a 26-year-old patient with a brain infection secondary to HIV/AIDS who could not afford the healthcare necessary to treat his illness, and so had to cease curative treatment and switch to end of life care. Never before had I seen a patient with a potentially curable disease be denied life-saving treatment due to a lack of personal funds; these experiences have reinforced my appreciation of the NHS and highlighted how much I have taken it for granted.

My 2 weeks on surgery were spent mainly in the operating theatres, assisting on a variety of operations, including kidney, gallbladder, appendix, thyroid and brain operations. I had several opportunities to join in on keyhole surgeries, and even got to perform my first surgical incision with a scalpel! I also spent a night shift working in the emergency room, where we saw many acutely unwell patients; most notably was a young girl who had been ambushed by a gang of armed men and shot in the arm – fortunately we were able to stabilise her and send her for fixation surgery the next day, after which she recovered well.

At the weekends, my elective partner and I travelled around the provinces of Cebu and Bohol, where we visited some of the most beautiful sandy beaches I've ever seen. I also did a number of scuba dives – I went on a few expeditions to islands in the Philippine sea where I saw turtles, sardine shoals and clownfish; one morning we headed out at 5am to dive with the famous (and terrifying) thresher sharks. Another morning, we swam inches away from gigantic whale sharks, and in the afternoon ventured into the jungle where we did some waterfall diving.

We then stopped over for 4 days in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where we spent some time unwinding and exploring the capital. We ended this incredible trip with a visit to the top of the Petronas twin towers, followed by a delicious beef rending curry in the street market below before catching a flight back to London.

Overall, my elective was everything I had hoped it would be and more. It has really broadened my horizons and given me a wealth of surgical experience, and I recommend any medical students considering an elective in South East Asia to go for it! I am now strongly considering a career in neurosurgery, particularly due to my experiences in Chiang Mai, and hope to bring these skills on to my future career. Elective was the best part of medical school, and I look forward to hopefully experiencing more global health later on in my career!