

Jessica Padley – Medical Elective, Vietnam, Summer 2018

I decided to undertake my elective at Cho Ray hospital in Ho Chi Minh City (or Saigon to the locals), Vietnam. I have always wanted to explore South East Asia and Vietnam in particular. It is a country well known for its friendly people, beautiful sights and incredible food. It is also a communist country - which makes life for doctors very different.

In terms of the healthcare system, it is funded by a combination of insurance, hospital charity and the hard earned money of the Vietnamese people. I wanted to observe how this impacted on patient treatment and care. Furthermore, it is a country that is rapidly developing and being able to see how healthcare changes with this really interested me.

I found Cho Ray hospital on the electives network and its reviews advertised a very hands on experience. It is also the second biggest hospital in Vietnam (a huge tertiary centre), with referrals coming from up to 200km away.

I decided to do Rheumatology for my first 4 weeks instead followed by 3 weeks on emergency medicine. I hoped to gain experience in practical skills, see the severe end of disease and gain insight into the lives of the Vietnamese people and doctors.

On the Rheumatology ward there were over 70 patients and signs left, right and centre. I saw end stage scleroderma, dermatomyositis, Potts disease, every complication of lupus and much more on just one ward round. And the gout was just unbelievable. One patient was covered with tophi, with one on his foot as big as my fist. The doctors on the ward spoke excellent English and would tell me about the patients in detail, with teaching daily. The doctors also allowed me to do joint injections and aspirations, which was really rewarding.

My supervisor Thanh was wonderful and we became great friends. She was open and honest about the lives of the Vietnamese, how the doctors earn relatively little and have to run private clinics on the side to earn more money. Every Thursday, we went belly-dancing together and she took me on trips to her old medical school and home for family dinners.

On emergency medicine, it was much busier and fast paced. I witnessed a great deal of cases which I wouldn't have seen back home - snake bites, pesticide poisoning, and a huge volume of trauma.

A big thing that I gained from my elective was an appreciation for our NHS. We work in a system that really cares for patients and gives high quality treatment free at the point of use. The hospitals in Vietnam are overloaded, overworked and expensive. Patient care is given in a paternalistic style - meaning what the doctor wants is what you will get (if you can afford it). Nurses are busy and do the majority of practical work. Patients are expected to have a relative with them at all times in order to care for them, wash them and feed them. Patients are rammed into rooms like sardines, with often more than one to a bed. There is no privacy and no curtains or screens.

We are also very lucky to have good quality district hospitals. Patients with homes hundreds of kilometers away had to spend weeks as inpatients on the ward for simple things such as IV antibiotics for septic arthritis. We are lucky to have a high quality community care that can deliver these services close to or even in patients homes.