

Elective Report on Hopitaly Vaovao Mahafaly, Mandritsara, Madagascar – Louise Mundy

HVM is a mission hospital serving an area the size of Wales in northern Madagascar.

When you think of Madagascar the images that spring to mind are of lemurs and rainforests, vanilla pods and baobabs. What most people don't realise, and I hadn't fully grasped before going, is that it is one of the poorest countries in the world (11th poorest in 2011 according to the IMF), with a government that seized power in a coup in 2009 and which isn't internationally recognised. This has had a huge impact on the health of the population in recent years, as much international aid has been withdrawn, meaning that the government-run healthcare facilities are extremely basic. In fact, when I was there government hospitals were pretty much non-functional as the government had failed to pay doctors, nurses and teachers for months, so they had been on strike since March. As HVM is a mission hospital it was still running, and the lack of other options for patients meant that it was even busier than usual.

The doctors at the hospital are mainly missionaries from Europe, however there are also some Malagasy doctors and the vast majority of the other staff are Malagasy. All of them were extremely welcoming and took the time to give teaching when we were seeing patients and let me perform procedures. I was able to do things which I'd never done before; such as lumbar punctures, incision and drainage of abscesses, giving spinal anaesthesia and suturing after laparotomies

The language common to all the staff was French and I really enjoyed the opportunity to put my language skills to use. The fact that I was working in French was no problem the majority of the time, although there were a few occasions where something got lost in translation, including a particularly memorable occasion when I had to find a kidney dish quickly- it turns out they are 'haricots' (beans) in French, not kidneys! In addition, having spent two years deciphering English acronyms in patient notes, I found myself having to learn a whole new set of French ones. Thankfully, lots of the medical terms were very similar in English and French, although a few eluded me at first- 'Hippocratism' definitely sounds much more exciting than 'clubbing!'

As well as the challenges of medical French, there was another far greater language barrier to contend with- the fact that the vast majority of the Malagasy *don't* speak French! In fact, in Mandritsara, they don't even speak official Malagasy, they speak Tsimihety, a dialect. The nurses were very happy to translate into French for me, so I was able to take histories this way. It certainly added a dimension that communication skills has never covered- not only using a translator but taking a history in a language that isn't your first. By the end of my seven weeks, though, I found that actually I was able to follow a fair bit of the Tsimihety used in consultations, as the doctors would ask many patients a very similar set of questions. I'm not sure how useful my knowledge of body parts in Tsimihety will be in my future career, but a *vazaha* (white person) speaking their language definitely amused a lot of the Malagasy I met and they seemed to appreciate the effort!

My elective was an absolutely unforgettable experience, which has taught me so many things which I will carry into my future career. Before going to Madagascar I'd thought that it was unlikely that I'd ever want to work abroad. Having spent seven weeks in Mandritsara I'm now thinking about when would be the best time to go back!