

Elective Grant Report



Saint Augustine's Medical Services Hospital

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Medicine is not a privilege; it is a gift and you use this for the good of mankind. I was incredibly lucky to spend four fantastic weeks in Grenada as part of my elective from the University of Western Australia, where I was able to fully immerse myself into the Grenadian culture. From organising Christmas parties for the Grenada Down Syndrome Association to dissipating myths about HIV and AIDS to locals, I hope that my involvement has created an everlasting impression on the Grenadian community.

Grenada

The 'Spice of the Caribbean', Grenada was a place of unbridled beauty, engorged with warm turquoise waters, silky sand beaches and a wealth of unspoilt flora. Albeit a small country (only 350 square kilometres) with a population of approximately 110,000, they are in fact one of the world's largest exporters of nutmeg and mace. It is a commonly used spice in the local cuisine, sprinkled over chicken, callaloo (type of spinach), fried plantain (like bananas), rice and even on hot chocolate! Suffice to say, my palate was enriched to a whole new level after engorging myself on their spiced cuisine day in and day out.

The capital, St George's, is an immensely attractive little town that is well worth a visit. However, a short drive along the coast from here lies the main attraction of the country – beaches. Though Australia may have some of the best beaches to offer in the world, the rawness of Grenada's beaches has quite a unique appeal. These beaches erupt out of nowhere from the rainforests that encapsulate it, providing quite a view for visitors. Whatever free time I received was spent traversing these very beaches and the surrounding rainforests, filled with waterfalls, mud baths and strenuous hikes. Once I got my fill for Grenadian beaches, I got involved with the local community by teaching children how to swim and organising Christmas parties for the kids from the Grenada Down Syndrome Association.

Getting around the country was an interesting activity to say the least. Instead of the traditional buses and taxis we are used to back at home, transport involved the utilisation of vans that could fit almost 20 people! It was probably the most efficient way to get around, as it kind of operated as a taxi as well – drivers are more than happy to drop you off to a more comfortable location, even if it is a little out of the way from the traditional route. What was amazing to see as well, was that the van drivers would ask "Want to go on bus?" to every potential passenger on the road, even if it would disrupt oncoming traffic! It would not matter if you are a mile away and are scrambling to get to the bus stop in time; if the driver sees you, they are more than happy to wait at the stop until you come on board. Let's just say that this contrasts my usual trepidation of catching a bus back at home.





Hyperbaric chamber



Ben (medical student),
Dr Amechi and myself



Grant Anse Beach, Grenada



Sitting on a bed of
uncomfortable shells just for
a photo at Hog Island

Medicine in Grenada

I was based at a hospital called St Augustine Medical Services (SAMS), located in the cool hills of St Paul's, 10 minutes away from St George's. My supervisor was Dr L.N. Amechi, a proud Arsenal FC supporter (much to my dismay due to my Chelsea FC roots) who established the clinic in 1998 to provide some alternative medical assistance to the Grenadian population. The major hospital of the country, Grenada General Hospital, often required long waits to access its medical services, which proved to be fatal for many patients. As a result, SAMS helps alleviate such waiting times to provide prompt medical assistance.

Despite its relatively small size (12 beds), SAMS offers comprehensive care for over 16 areas of clinical services and caters for medical, surgical, maternity and emergency admissions. I am eternally grateful to Dr Amechi, as he took me under his wing and exposed me to the wide range of medicine that Grenada has to offer.

One service that was particularly unique to SAMS was their hyperbaric chamber. It is a pressurised vessel which allows hyperbaric oxygen therapy, the medical use of oxygen at a pressure higher than atmospheric pressure. Although I assumed that the chamber was only used for decompression sickness experienced by the plethora of scuba divers that come to experience Grenada's underwater beauty, I was grossly mistaken. This versatile apparatus was useful in the treatment for not only decompression illness, but also acute carbon monoxide poisoning, osteomyelitis, intracranial abscesses, diabetic ulcers, thermal burns, compromised grafts, compartment syndrome and much more! Under the tutelage of Dr Tyler Sexton, an awe-inspiring doctor born with cerebral palsy, I was able to learn a new medical speciality: hyperbaric medicine. Being a clinical professor of the Hyperbaric Medicine Association, he was able to teach myself and the local students how to operate the chamber, the different indications for its use and its maintenance. Although it has not yet been adopted as a potential treatment use in Australia, Dr Sexton believes that the research is there to show its worth and hence it will not be long until it becomes available in healthcare systems around the world.

Health issues in Grenada and the use of the MIGA Elective Grant

To my dismay, the spectacular sceneries of this beautiful country acted as a façade to a disease that terrorises hundreds of Grenadian communities still to this day: human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). HIV prevalence in the Caribbean is the second highest in the world (after Sub-Saharan Africa), with an estimated prevalence of 0.83% among Grenadian adults.

Ever since the peak of HIV/AIDS incidence and prevalence rates in the early 2000s, Grenada had benefited from numerous organisations (Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), Caribbean HIV/AIDS Alliance (CHAA)), that provided grants and initiatives for educational campaigns, counselling and targeted interventions to control the epidemic that had ravaged communities. However, many of these organisations have terminated their HIV and AIDS related funding to Grenada; the loss of the PEPFAR and OECS grants (in 2016) was particularly devastating, as they provided subsidised antiretroviral drugs, condoms, testing and counselling for rural communities.

Because of this loss of funding and the associated counselling and education programs that were available throughout the country, HIV/AIDS prevalence has increased in Grenada.

There are still huge stigmas and myths associated with this disease that have not dissipated since HIV/AIDS was first introduced to the country. Examples of such myths include:

- HIV can be "washed off" with soap, detergent or by swimming in Grenadian waterfalls
- Marriage protects its spouses from contracting or spreading HIV
- Testing HIV-free once means one is free from HIV life-long
- Wearing condoms is a sign of infidelity.

GrenAIDS, an organisation established in 2010, has been the forefront for HIV/AIDS and STI public education in Grenada. They aim to dispel these myths as well as others via projects and programs that are designed to achieve positive behavioural change. My role as an MIGA Elective Grant recipient was to target the general socioeconomic, cultural and educational issues faced by patients suffering from this disease, as well as to alleviate some of these social stigmas. A part of the MIGA Grant was allocated to GrenAIDS to educate school children about the truth about HIV and AIDS. This involved establishing interactive group sessions that allowed free flowing discussions about sexual health, HIV and its transmission amongst the children through art, poetry and games.



Seven Sisters Waterfalls



Enjoying a mud bath
in Grenville



Getting cramped on my
way to hospital in the
minivan/bus



Wrapping presents for
Grenada's Down Syndrome
Association Christmas Party

One aspect that came to surprise me during my elective was the abundance of sexual abuse amongst females that runs rife in the Caribbean. Currently, one in every two Caribbean adolescent females have been sexually abused in their lifetime.

Consequences of child sexual abuse can affect children and families immediately and can cause follow-on effects throughout the life of the survivor, such as mental health issues and non-communicable diseases like cardiovascular disease. As such, the impact on society from just one survivor can continue over several decades. Sweet Water foundation, established in 2008 by psychotherapist Hazel Da Breo, is an organisation that is dedicated to the healing of child sexual abuse in Grenada, with a special focus on the Indigenous population, LGBTQI and other vulnerable communities. They conduct research, develop practice recommendations, provide psychological treatment programs and design training in psychological approaches, to end gendered inequalities, abuse and violence. The other part of the MIGA Grant was used to help establish an art therapy program for Grenadian adolescent females at the Sweet Water centre in St George's. Sexual abuse and sexual practices are topics that patients struggle to talk about with strangers. For this reason, this art therapy program was designed to create activities that allow girls to express freely how they feel, through drawings and paintings, rather than being enforced to actively talk.

Final thoughts

Grenada provided the spice I needed to start my final year of medicine. There were life changing experiences and lessons that I will cherish for the rest of my life. What I wanted most out of the trip however was that I leave a meaningful and everlasting impression on the Grenadian community. With the MIGA Grant, I feel like I have done so. People do not volunteer or donate to charities for the "thank you" or for feeling good about being a Good Samaritan. It is about attempting to provide an equal level of care and support that we sometimes take for granted back at home in our well-established health care centres. I hope that the MIGA Grant and my involvement has in some way improved the life of the Grenadian people, just as they have done to mine.

Each year MIGA's Elective Grants Program offers 10 Grants of \$3,000 to medical students undertaking electives in developing communities. Each Grant includes \$1,500 to cover the student's personal elective costs and \$1,500 to provide medicine or other aid to the local community. To be inspired by other past recipients and find out more about applying, visit our website.

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