As part of my fourth year medical elective at Griffith University, I had the fortunate experience of spending seven weeks at Vila Central Hospital, in Vanuatu’s capital, Port Vila. Vila Central Hospital is the national referring hospital for Vanuatu and is located on the island of Efate. Tropical Cyclone Pam struck this already poverty stricken country on March 13, 2015. The cyclone resulted in loss of life, devastating destruction to the capital’s essential infrastructure and destroyed part of the Port Vila Central Hospital. Months after Pam hit and with more than 160,000 people displaced, Vanuatu is still rebuilding. When I arrived in Vanuatu three months later, the country was still in a declared state of emergency.

Throughout my placement at Vila Central Hospital I was able to gain insight into many tropical diseases. With limited pathology and radiology investigatory options, I was able to vastly improve my clinical skills. As well as clinical knowledge, the experience enabled me to obtain valuable insight into the challenges developing countries face when providing medical care to their community.

The importance of primary health care and education was highlighted every day in the Hospital, with so many preventable and treatable disease processes presenting very late and often, too late.

Being a large archipelago nation, logistically it is difficult to provide reliable primary health care to the people of Vanuatu. Vila Central Hospital is one of three hospitals located on different islands in Vanuatu and is the national referring hospital of the country. The other 79 islands utilise small nurse-run health clinics scattered throughout the country, with visiting doctors every few months. A medical air evacuation service is available to patients in need of immediate medical attention. Doctors on call at Vila Central Hospital are often called out in the middle of the night to retrieve seriously ill patients if they require more advanced medical attention.

The old section of the Hospital has four main wards, general medicine, paediatrics, general surgery and obstetrics. The recently built new section of the Hospital boasts two new operating theatres, a pharmacy, emergency room and an outpatient department. Outpatient clinics are often over-run; it is a common sight to see patients including, heavily pregnant mothers, lining up in the sweltering heat outside clinics. Clinics run on island time, with non-allocated appointment times patients are seen on a first come first serve basis. Mental health is unfortunately a culturally taboo issue in the Ni’van community and patients who suffer from mental illness often become outcasts in society. An aptly named “Mind Care” ward exists as a two bed section of the General Medical Ward and is staffed by one of the physicians with an interest in mental health. Throughout my placement I was able to rotate through different hospital departments including obstetrics and gynaecology, general medicine, general surgery and anaesthetics. This variety gave me a thorough insight into the workings of the Hospital and helped to further my interest and understanding of the Ni’van culture.

The lack of resources in the Hospital was extremely evident, particularly post Cyclone Pam. With no CT or MRI scanner, limited pathology and drugs available, no chemoradiotherapy and without the ability to perform laparoscopic surgery, the doctors did their best with what they had available to them, sometimes relying on clinical signs alone to diagnose conditions.

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I was surprised at how the Ni’van patients always wore gleaming smiles despite facing much adversity due to their health conditions.

Not only did the lack of resources make it difficult for doctors to provide reliable health care, but also the community’s low health literacy. Due to the strong religious influences in the country, sick people would usually turn to their pastor or minister first to seek help with their ailments. If this failed, they would then try traditional remedies and only then, if their condition had not improved, would patients present to hospital. One of the biggest challenges that the teams faced was the fact that the only radiology available was x-ray and ultrasound. With no CT, it was difficult to diagnose and treat patients with suspected neurological conditions. The option to send patients to Fiji for investigation and treatment was available, however, it rarely eventuated due to logistical and financial reasons.

The people of Vanuatu are known to be the ‘happiest in the world’. During my time at Vila Central Hospital they did not disappoint. Every morning on my walk into the hospital I was greeted with countless “mornings!” from strangers on the street. The Ni’van people are very friendly, a stark contrast to the streets of the Gold Coast. The doctors and hospital staff were delightful and made me feel very welcome. I felt as though I was part of the team and was able to participate in a lot of activities to assist my learning, including many practical procedures.

A particular highlight for me was assisting in surgery, including tubal ligations, my first mastectomy (on a male patient!), also many skin grafts and wound debridements and limb amputations. As well as practicing my clinical skills, I was able to learn basic Bislama. Surprisingly on top of this I was able to practice my Mandarin, with many Chinese doctors working in the Hospital on exchange.

The issues surrounding women’s health in Vanuatu were of particular significance to me during my elective. I spent three weeks of my time with the obstetrics and gynaecology team whilst at Vila Central Hospital. The busy labour ward was a constantly bustling place with high patient turnover rates. Screening programs for women’s health were not established and many women presented in the late stages of cervical or breast cancer.

Treatment options were limited and supportive care was usually the only option if the cancer was advanced. Patients relied on their family members to donate blood on a daily basis to keep them comfortable during palliative treatment.

As my own mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent extensive treatment in 2012, I really felt for these patients that had run out of options. As well as this, I was shocked at the high birth rates in young women of similar age to myself. I felt privileged that I could assist in promoting women’s health by counselling women on the use of contraceptives and placing numerous “Jadelles” or “Implanons” sticks in women who had just given birth. By the end of the rotation the intern on my team nicknamed me the “Jadelle Queen”, due to the large number of these procedures I performed during my placement.

Equality and women’s rights are an issue in Vanuatu that needs addressing. During my time at Vila Central Hospital, a number of female patients presented with injuries consistent with domestic violence. This alerted me to the fact that domestic violence against women is an issue in the community that is not widely discussed.

On top of my clinical hours I was able to take some time to enjoy and experience the wonderful country of Vanuatu. I was able to visit some of the major islands, including Efate, Pentecost, Santo and Tanna. During these trips, I was able to witness first-hand the world renowned Pentecost Island land diving, climb a live volcano on Tanna Island, visit some of the best beaches in the world on Santo and scuba dive magnificent coral reefs and ship wrecks in Efate. In addition, I was able to experience the local celebrations in Port Vila for the country’s Independence Day on July 30th, a colourful celebration of culture and community. As well as my connections with the staff at Vila Central Hospital, I made lasting friendships with other “baby doc” medical students from all over the globe who were also on medical elective.

My experience on medical elective in Vanuatu was an invaluable and unforgettable experience. Reflecting on my time spent at Vila Central Hospital, I was able to grow as a person both personally and professionally. Exposure to the health care system in a developing nation allowed me to really appreciate the health care available in Australia. My experience highlighted the paramount importance of primary health care and prevention. Being submerged in a different culture was exciting. I thoroughly enjoyed learning basic Bislama and experiencing the Ni’van culture. Spending time with Ni’van patients heightened my awareness of my communication skills. I was able to realise the importance of being culturally appropriate both linguistically and with the use of body language. The most influential aspect of my placement was witnessing first-hand the stoic nature of the Ni’van people, despite ongoing adversity. The camaraderie of the people was infectious. Despite one of the worst natural disasters affecting the country just three months ago, the people keep on smiling and continue to rebuild.
I would like to take the time to thank MIGA for their continued support throughout my medical elective in Vanuatu. The funds from my Medical Support Grant will be directed to Vila Central Hospital to assist in helping the hospital community rebuild and provide much needed health care supplies to patients in need. I hope to return one day to Vanuatu when more qualified to offer my services as a medical professional. Until then, I recommend any medical student looking for an exciting, culturally stimulating and clinically invaluable experience to attend Vila Central Hospital. Tank yu tuma!