

Medical Student Elective in the Philippines and Tanzania

After completing my final year studying Medicine at Oxford University, I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to go on placement abroad. The “Medical Elective” is designed to give medical students in the UK the chance to see healthcare in other countries, where not only the infrastructure and resources are dramatically different, but so too are the medical conditions.

The first half of my elective was spent at Cebu University Doctor’s Hospital in the Philippines. There were many parallels between this hospital and those I have worked in England, in terms of equipment, facilities and the training programme for the junior doctors. The most striking difference however was that the entire hospital was private. In a country where the average monthly income is less than £100, healthcare in a hospital such as the one I was placed in is a real luxury. This was reflected in the empty Accident and Emergency department, and the one vascular operation a day. This is very contrasting to the long A&E wait times we hear about in the UK, and the surgical theatres that run with seemingly never ending lists of patients each day. Although some Filipinos do pay into a national insurance scheme, which has been recently become free to the over 65s, this will not necessarily cover the whole bill. For example, patients who needed dialysis three times a week were only covered for a third of their treatment. This meant that some patients only had one weekly dialysis session and therefore developed complications associated with kidney failure much earlier.

I was also fortunate enough during my time there to visit one of the outreach programmes, that went into the community to give healthcare to the villagers who were unable to access the hospital. This work is comparable to a drop in General Practice clinic in the UK and has only been set up in recent years, through the hard work of social workers. They also provide much needed family planning and midwife lead clinics, as well as physiotherapy rehab treatment for stroke patients.

The second half of my elective was spent in the Kilimanjaro Christian Medical Centre. This hospital was one of the biggest tertiary hospitals in Tanzania and I was amazed at the distances that patients would travel to get an appointment to see a doctor there. I was based on the Paediatric ward and saw conditions that I had only read about in textbooks at home, such as Rheumatic fever, Sickle Cell Anaemia and Malaria. The frequency of HIV positive patients shocked me as well, and I was impressed by the state funded treatment of both children and adults who carried the virus.

I attended many clinics during my time at KCMC but the one that really stood out for me was the neurology one. Here the most common presenting complaint was Cerebral Palsy. In England, children with Cerebral palsy usually have an underlying pathology that is responsible for the brain damage, however in Tanzania almost all of the cases were due to perinatal causes, a reflection of the lack of good obstetric care. This is a big problem for low income countries, with 10 million cases of brain atrophy globally each year, 99% of these are in developing countries. The poorest countries are also worse equipped to support this level of disability and so seeing these children was made even sadder by knowing that there was a preventable cause for their illness.

All in all, my elective was a unique opportunity to learn about some of the most challenging contemporary global health issues. It made me reflect on how lucky we are in the UK to have the NHS and a healthcare system that is accessible to all. I hope that I will take forward the experiences I had in the Philippines and Tanzania into my new job as a doctor and always be mindful of how challenging medicine is in developing countries, as well as my own. I am now working on a project with the Oxford Ethics Group (Ethox) looking at how medical ethics is taught in developing countries. I am very grateful for the support Cheadle Hulme School Old Wac's Society have given me to go out to these countries and have such a fantastic learning experience.

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