

Andrew Dent Scholarship report

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Central Hospital, Port Vila Vanuatu – August to September 2024



Through generous support of the Andrew Dent scholarship, I had the opportunity to travel to Port Vila, Vanuatu to complete my final year medical elective.

Central Hospital, located in Efate, is the largest hospital in Vanuatu, having 200 beds, and receiving referrals from all surrounding islands. I spent my six weeks, rotating 3-weeks in emergency and 3-weeks in internal medicine.



Fortuitously, I completed the rotation in Vanuatu's winter months, which is outside of monsoon, cyclone and tsunami season, making for a pleasant rotation. Reflections, on my overall experience in Vanuatu:

Resource and health literacy challenges and geographical barriers

Lack of healthcare resources was evident on my first day at Central Hospital. Things that we take for granted in Australia, such as ready access to oxygen and nebuliser masks, need to be washed and reused. Low stocks of intravenous medications is overcome by keeping partially used vials for the next patient. Lack of access to CT and MRI, means that clinical decision making is more heavily based on examination skills and bedside investigations. For example, deciding whether to fly a patient to India for emergency angiogram +/- stenting, relies on doctors using ECG findings suggesting cardiac artery stenosis and the patient's underlying comorbidity, to help guide their decision. The cost is paid by the family, or foreign aid if they can source it. Despite this, I witnessed healthcare workers making the most out of what they had available. Lack of tourniquets were circumvented with using gloves as a makeshift tourniquet, asthma spacers are fashioned out of disposable, plastic water bottles. Ultrasound and liver function testing are used to diagnose liver metastases in cancer patients.

Vanuatu is made up of 83 islands, and home to people from all different backgrounds: Those living in cities, farms, mountains and forests. With the collapse of air Vanuatu in May 2024, people must catch a ferry to reach Port Vila, which can take up to 24hrs – Further limiting accessibility to healthcare.

Island medicine is still first-line medicine for many people in Vanuatu, and they view western medicine as a short-term 'fix' to the problem. An example of this is a person with chronic osteomyelitis, treated with local/traditional herbal medicines at home on an outer Island. When I saw this young person, they had taken a 20hr ferry to seek medical attention, and their osteomyelitis had progressed to the point that they required above knee amputation.

Emergency Department

The emergency department is staffed with 1 volunteer Consultant (from Australia during my rotation), 4 registrars and 1 intern. The medical director is a local, senior registrar who is being supported by the volunteer Consultant, to complete their emergency medicine training. Because of limited medical coverage, the triage nurse (seeing on average 200 people a day), is the gatekeeper to the emergency department, treating up to 80% of presentations without a doctor being involved in their care. This means that the acuity of patients who do see a doctor, is usually high. Complex chronic disease, PV bleeding, sepsis, acute coronary syndromes and high-level trauma are all common presentations.

As a medical student, I independently assessed patients and developed and initiated management plans. This could be daunting at times, pushing me outside of my comfort zone, but was also a fantastic learning opportunity, and I felt helped build skills I will need as a junior doctor. For example, I had a septic patient in rapid atrial fibrillation and at the same time, a hypertensive patient with significant bradycardia. The juxtaposition of these two presentations, tested my clinical decision-making abilities.

Internal Medicine

Internal medicine had 2 Consultants, 2 Registrars and 3 Interns during my 3-week rotation.

TB, rheumatic heart disease and Hepatitis B are common, along with Late presentations in patients with non-communicable diseases, such as hypertension, ischaemic heart disease, heart failure, dyslipidaemia, type 2 diabetes myelitis, kidney disease and metastatic cancer. Likely contributing factor is low health literacy and geographical barriers making it difficult to access healthcare.

As a medical student, I functioned at an intern level, reviewing patients on ward rounds or clinic and presenting to the Registrar/Consultant. Although challenging, I felt well-supported, giving me confidence to develop management plans for complex medical conditions and improve my clinical reasoning skills.

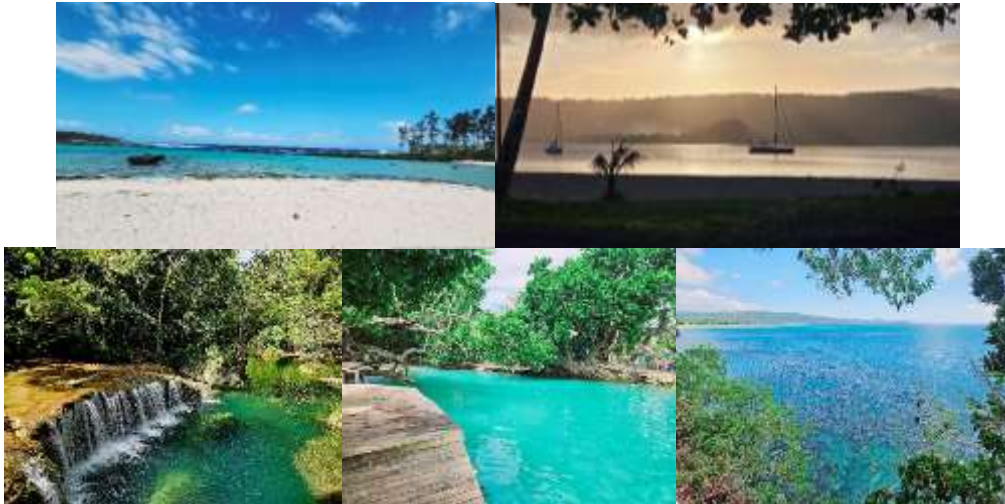
Food, travel and sightseeing

Food was surprisingly expensive, but the local markets offer a wide variety of reasonably priced fruit and vegetables and a fun cultural experience.



Travelling around Port Vila via local buses (150 Vatu/trip), is also an interesting experience. But similarly, it is easy and safe to walk if your accommodation is close to the hospital.

There are many amazing places to visit on Efate, including cultural experiences, national museum, waterfalls/cascades, beaches, lagoons, and reef snorkelling. All were amazing, although my favourites were top rock snorkelling, the cultural village and day trips to Nguna, Pele and Moso islands.



1: Eton beach; 2: Mele beach at sunset; 3: Rarru river cascade; 4: Blue lagoon; 5: Top rock

Tips and tricks to securing a placement in Port Vila

It is important to make contact well in advance; I recommend 6 months prior. Dr Errolyn Tungu (Acting Medical Superintendent) gives approval for medical student placements. Leipakoa Andre (Head Administration Assistant) organises your placement and is the person you will communicate with. I advise contacting Leipakoa Andre first, and she will pass on Dr Tungu's details.

Why choose Port Vila, Central Hospital

You will get invaluable hands-on experience to a wide variety of complex pathologies that you may never get to experience any other time in your medical career. Additionally, the Ni-Vanuatu people are friendly and embrace you into their community. They value family, community, and the time that you invest into their healthcare.

Overall, this rotation has been a humbling and informative experience, where I learnt a lot about managing complex care in a resource poor environment, and the importance of resourcefulness and resilience when faced with challenging healthcare situations.