

Internal Medicine Elective, Tupua Tamasese Meaole Hospital, Apia, Samoa.

By Matthew Slater.

Talofa! In December of 2024 I was fortunate enough to take part in a two-week medical elective at Tupua Tamasese Meaole (TTM) Hospital in Apia, Samoa. My time at TTM hospital gave me insight into the way medicine is practiced in another nation with different challenges when compared to Australia. The incredible beauty of Samoa and the enrichment of my medical education made my trip truly unforgettable. This wonderful experience was only possible with the support of the St Vincent's Pacific Health Fund Board and the Andrew Dent Scholarship, and I am extremely grateful for all the assistance I received.

My two weeks was spent on the internal medicine ward at TTM hospital with a large team of doctors, nurses, and fellow students. The majority of the patients on the ward were suffering from chronic diseases including complications of diabetes, heart failure, cerebrovascular disease and chronic kidney disease. The presentations of these diseases were typically more severe/late-stage than I have seen in Australia, which was attributed to differing levels of resources



Volunteer cardiologist performing a TTE

as well as less emphasis on primary care. The doctors on the team frequently highlighted to patients that Samoa was a poorly resourced nation in terms of medical supplies and medical technology, which limited their treatment options. For example, during my two weeks, there was a supply shortage of thrombolytic agents, which significantly impacted the options for treating cardiovascular events. This was initially jarring for me but really highlighted the ingenuity and resilience shown by the team of internal medicine doctors.

Despite the limitations on treating episodes of severe disease, the patients I met were always exceptionally kind and welcoming. This was echoed in the hospital staff, who displayed

incredible compassion and care for all of their patients and taught me a great deal while I was there. Dr. Nathan, an internal medicine doctor, taught us after seeing each patient on the ward round, ensuring that we felt included even if the patient only spoke Samoan. Due to this, I learnt a considerable amount about treating late-stage disease and got a chance to see clinical signs that I hadn't seen in my training before, such as asterixis due to hypercapnia. The ward itself was preparing for Christmas and was covered in decorations and many Christmas lights to get everyone into the holiday spirit. This contributed to the welcoming environment the staff created, and they made sure to include us in their lunchtime sweet treats so that we felt like part of the team.

Above all, learning from a team of incredibly dedicated doctors with inspiring work ethics was a pleasure, and I can't thank them enough.



To Sua Ocean Trench

In the afternoons after placement and on the weekends, I had the chance to explore the natural beauty of Samoa with some fellow medical students. There was no shortage of incredible swimming spots and awesome activities to fill out my free time. The famous To Sua Ocean Trench and Giant Clam Sanctuary were both highly recommended by the hospital staff and they did not disappoint.

Aside from these two spots, the island of Upolu was full of beautiful beaches and hidden waterfalls. One of the popular tourist sites is the home of Robert Louis Stevenson, the author of the famous novel *Treasure Island*. A quick hike up the neighbouring hill takes you to his tomb and provides an excellent view of the lush green island below.



Good beaches with Max, a fellow medical student from NZ.



Robert Louis Stevenson Museum

Alongside the tourist sites, a lot of my free time was spent with other medical students I met in Samoa. These students, both local Samoan students and students from various other countries, made my time outside of the hospital just as enjoyable as my time on the wards. I hope that some

of these students will continue to be my friends for many years to come.

On my second last night, a group of us attended a traditional Samoan FiaFia night which featured fire dancing, local food, and lots of Christmas carols. This is a must do activity for anyone visiting Samoa!

Above all, I could not have had any of these wonderful experiences, both clinical and social, without the assistance of the Dent Family and the St Vincent's Hospital Pacific Health Fund Board. I cannot thank them enough for helping myself and other students to diversify our clinical exposure and experience medicine in the Pacific region. I also want to thank the staff at TTM hospital who were so kind and welcoming to me and made sure I had the best placement experience I could have asked for. I hope to see all my new friends from TTM hospital and Samoa again one day soon!

