

Reflection on Vanuatu Elective Placement

Placement at the Vila Central Hospital on Efate Island in Vanuatu has been one of the most unique opportunities of my life. Working in the Pacific Islands has been a dream of mine since I did my honours thesis on medicine in the Pacific, so being able to come here as a final-year medical student has been incredible.

My initial placement was planned to be two weeks in Obstetrics & Gynaecology (O&G), and one week in Ophthalmology. However, by chance, I had been scheduled to start 10 days after the devastating earthquakes that rocked Port Vila. For a couple of days, it seemed like placement would be cancelled, and less than 24 hours before our flight, my friend Srishti (another medical student on elective to Vanuatu) and I were informed that our placement would be postponed. We resolved to go to Port Vila anyway, and that Monday, we spoke in person with the hospital administrators and got reallocated to the Emergency Department (ED), with two weeks in O&G after that.

Emergency

We got thrown into the deep end starting in ED, just after a natural disaster, in the week between Christmas and New Year's. People were still coming in with minor injuries from the earthquake, and the damage to Port Vila was all around. Thankfully, the hospital buildings suffered minimal damage, and with support from Indonesian, Fijian and Australian medical assistance teams, the hospital was getting back on its feet.



*Day 1 in the Emergency Department. The three of us are eating fresh mangos bought in by the staff.
Left to right: Bethany Grice, Marta Cortada-McCorkell, Srishti Chatterji*

There were three medical students, and we were off triaging patients, running the suturing area of the ED and reporting our findings to the only doctor in the ED. With staff and resource shortages, it was chaotic yet every patient was seen and treated. I was amazed at

the high level of skill of the nursing staff, as there is normally only one doctor per ED shift, so the nurses are excellent at triaging and caring for the patients. They were also invaluable in teaching us how to perform new procedural skills. The expectations here are different as well. None of the doctors in ED are consultants, so junior doctors (and even medical students) are expected to be much more competent at procedural and diagnostic skills at far earlier stages in training.

Obstetrics & Gynaecology

I observed the same high responsibility level in O&G. Interns and registrars again run the wards, with only occasional visits from the consultants (although they are only a phone call away). I was blown away by the ingenious creativity of the staff, within such a resource-constrained environment. Out-of-the-box thinking is everywhere, from gloves being used as tourniquets, to blueys as a form of PPE during births, to DIY-ing an ascitic fluid tap drain. As medical students, we have to help with everything! I delivered my first baby, assisted in countless vaginal births, did postnatal baby checks, assessed antenatal mothers, did dressing changes, presented on various clinical topics and discussed clinical cases with the doctors. The Fijian midwives, here to assist after the earthquake, took us under their wing and showed us how to do all aspects of a normal vaginal delivery - something I would rarely get to do in Australia due to our high rates of caesarean sections.



Srishti and I with our Fijian midwife teachers

Left to right: Mereani Gavidu, Marta Cortada-McCorkell, Srishti Chatterji, Maopa Nainima

The doctors included us in everything, and the learning environment was so supportive. It also felt like we were actually contributing to the team.

Outside of the Hospital

Aside from the medicine, it has been an unusual time to visit Vanuatu. The echoes of the earthquakes are everywhere, in the occasional aftershocks, and in how one of the first questions someone asks you when you meet them is “*Were you here when the earthquake happened?*”. There is widespread heartbreak for the lives lost, yet resilient adaptation to the changes and happiness in enjoying the moment. It is also the middle of the election period, so despite it being one month since the earthquake, few things have returned to normal, and the centre of Port Vila is still closed off. So, when we aren’t snorkelling after placement, the other medical students and I have been doing our best to support the reopening of local businesses by buying lots of fruit from the mamas along the road, visiting cafes on their opening days, tipping extra on our bus rides and eating local island kakai for lunch.



Snorkelling off Iririki Island after a big day on placement.

Left to right: Bethany Grice, Srishti Chatterji, Marta Cortada-McCorkell

Personal Reflection

This has been one of my most influential rotations in medicine so far. The doctors here have taught me to open my mind, think creatively, utilise every resource available to me to its maximum capacity, be courageous but safe, and collaborate extensively with our nursing colleagues. The doctors had greater expectations of us than they do in Australia, so I had to trust my knowledge and myself more. For example, I do know how to suture so if suturing is needed, I can do it. Arriving just after a natural disaster meant that we got to meet a lot of the humanitarian teams, as well as Australian volunteers up here running training for the junior doctors. It was a privilege to get to see how they work to support the local doctors in recovery after the earthquake. Overall, the trip was very inspiring and has fuelled my motivation to specialise in rural generalism and return to the Pacific to continue the relationships I’ve built here. I am so grateful for this opportunity and will carry what I’ve learnt into the future.

By Marta Cortada-McCorkell