

Vanuatu Clinical Elective Reflection

Introduction

I had the honour of completing an elective placement in Obstetrics & Gynaecology and the Emergency Department in Vila Central Hospital (VCH) for three weeks, just before the commencement of my final year of medical school. Overall, it was a very special placement, and despite the short duration, I left Vanuatu with a wealth of knowledge and some important professional and personal lessons. To set the context for my reflection, my placement partner and I arrived 1.5 weeks after a 7.3 magnitude earthquake tried to shake the spirit of Vanuatu. There was hence a period of uncertainty about my placement before it began, but inspired by the resilient spirit of the Ni-Vanuatu community, we also learnt to persist and march on.



Figure 1: My placement partner, Marta Cortada-McCorkell, and I on the morning of our first day at placement



Figure 2: the other medical students and I eating fresh mango in the ED staff room on our first day

My Hospital Experience

Overall, I had a phenomenal learning experience which has definitely contributed to my professional growth. Due to the earthquake, our placement was initially postponed. However, we were really keen to commence O&G and discussed this with the friendly administrative task who were happy to reallocate us to the ED for the first week. We were welcomed into the team and given significant responsibilities from Day 1. We were clerking patients individually and handing over to the doctors who would help us devise a management plan. This greatly enhanced my confidence in completing a full patient assessment, along with honing my skills in accurate diagnosis. My favourite moment was when I noticed a patient's sclera were jaundiced, which then helped in making the diagnosis of cholecystitis when the initial thought from another clinician was pneumonia. ED was also a great way to practice procedural skills I have been trained in such as suturing, cannulation, and venepuncture. The ED nurses were great supervisors and teachers with a wealth of theoretical knowledge and technical in these procedures. The equipment for the procedures was different to what I was used to in Australia, so it was great practice to learn to work with any equipment available around me. There were also times where due to the shortage of resources, the precise set of equipment was not available. These were opportunities to work with the doctor and creatively craft a solution by joining different pieces of equipment that was already available. My time at ED made me much more confident to dive straight into my final year of medical school, imparting me with knowledge and increased competence in clinical and procedural skills. I am certain that this will prepare me well for my incoming year of internship in 2026.

Whilst I learnt a lot in ED, my following two weeks in O&G were truly transformative. The midwives, nurses, and doctors encouraged our active participation in deliveries, baby checks, and postnatal ward rounds; and we were able to observe the process of labour from its

commencement. After assisting in numerous vaginal deliveries throughout my first week, I was able to independently deliver my first baby on 10th January, 2025 and it was one of the most memorable days of my life. I was in awe of the highly skilled midwives who were very happy to teach us and ensure we had the opportunity to deliver a baby. My second independent delivery occurred in the second week of O&G. Furthermore, I learnt other crucial skills including drawing up and administering medications such as syntocin and ergometrine. Moreover, with doctor supervision, I completed my first ascitic tap; another procedural skill I likely would not have been able to practice in Australia due to the abundance of other, more senior clinicians who need the clinical experience. I had not been able to engage so actively in my O&G placement in Australia, so I thoroughly enjoyed my time in VCH Maternity; especially as O&G is my favourite rotation.



Figure 3: Marta and I on our last day with the O&G doctors



Figure 4: Marta and I pictured with the clinician who supervised us during our independent vaginal deliveries



Figure 5: Marta and I pictured with the fabulous midwives from Fiji who trained us and encouraged active participation in vaginal deliveries

Personal Growth

Despite my thorough enjoyment in placement, there were some difficulties along the way. However, I am very grateful for these hurdles as they were instrumental in my personal growth. Firstly, there was sometimes a communication barrier with patients; which prompted me to carry a booklet with common medical Bislama phrases so I could gather an accurate history from a patient. It was also difficult to be appointed with so much responsibility with procedures, clerking, and medications as it was an unfamiliar experience to my clinical placement in Australia; which incorporates more observation relative to active participation. Nevertheless, I found myself rising to the challenge and always agreeing to learning opportunities which tested and expanded my skill set. This experience has enabled me to strengthen my muscles of resilience which has contributed to my personal and professional development. It has also helped me develop confidence and belief in myself and my abilities to approach clinical skills, which will in turn help me in my professional life. Therefore, I have no doubt that my placement experience in Port Vila will make me a more skilled and adaptable future clinician and also a more resilient and self-assured individual.



Figure 6: Marta pictured with the powerpoint we made and presented during a handover in the Maternity ward

Conclusion

My clinical elective in Vanuatu will be a cherished core memory of medical school for many years to come. I feel so lucky and grateful that I was able to experience clinical learning in VCH, being taught by excellent doctors, midwives, and nurses who were resilient, adaptable and flexible with the limited resources available whilst maintaining empathy and care for their patients.