

Clinical Elective in Samoa: Healthcare and Cultural Insights

During my clinical elective at Tupua Tamasese Meaole Hospital in Apia, Samoa, I had the privilege of engaging deeply with the healthcare system of this South Pacific nation. This elective provided a comprehensive understanding of the unique challenges faced by Samoa's healthcare sector and offered me the opportunity to enhance my clinical skills in a resource-constrained environment, all while fostering a deep appreciation for the cultural richness and resilience of the Samoan people.

Samoa, with a population of approximately 200,000, contends with a dual burden of disease. While infectious diseases such as dengue fever and tuberculosis persist, the country is increasingly grappling with a significant rise in non-communicable diseases, notably diabetes and cardiovascular conditions. The high prevalence of obesity and related comorbidities has become a critical public health concern, compounded by limited resources and healthcare access. My work in the paediatric ward exposed me to a variety of cases, including rheumatic fever, which remains a pervasive issue in Samoa, as well as respiratory conditions such as asthma and pneumonia.

The hospitality of the Samoan people was immediately apparent and profoundly impactful. From my arrival, I was warmly welcomed, particularly by the staff at Lynns Accommodation, who went out of their way to assist me, including offering transportation and extending invitations to cultural events. These interactions were instrumental in fostering strong relationships and provided me with a deeper understanding of the Samoan way of life, enriching both my professional and personal experience.



Figure 1. Resuscitation room on the paediatric ward.

My clinical responsibilities at the hospital were both extensive and challenging, primarily within the paediatric team. I was entrusted with significant responsibilities, including patient admissions, documenting ward rounds, preparing discharge summaries, and performing ultrasounds. The

team's support and willingness to involve me in all aspects of patient care significantly enhanced my learning experience and professional development.

A particularly striking aspect of my elective was the frequent scarcity of medical resources. For instance, I encountered a patient in the emergency department suffering from an ischemic stroke; unfortunately, the necessary anticoagulation therapy could not be administered due to a lack of available stock. Similarly, there were shortages of critical medications, including analgesics, on the paediatric ward. These experiences highlighted the challenges inherent in providing quality healthcare in resource-limited settings and underscored the necessity for adaptability and innovation in clinical practice.



Figure 2. Admissions and examination room on the paediatric ward.

An interesting feature of the Samoan healthcare system is its blood donation protocol. In Samoa, when a patient requires a blood transfusion, it is customary for a family member to donate blood as a replacement. This practice, while unique, shares some conceptual similarities with the communal blood donation systems seen in other countries, such as Australia. This direct link between patient care and family contribution adds a deeply personal dimension to the healthcare process, reflecting the strong familial bonds that are central to Samoan culture.

Another aspect that stood out during my stay was the cost of medications. When I developed a cold and sought to purchase Codral, a common cold remedy, I was surprised by the price—over 38 tala, a significant amount relative to the average daily income in Samoa. This experience highlighted the financial barriers many Samoans face in accessing essential healthcare, and it prompted me to reflect on the broader implications of economic disparities in global health.

The educational component of my elective was exemplary. Local consultants demonstrated a strong commitment to teaching, and I had the opportunity to learn from visiting specialists from the United States. A particularly valuable experience was shadowing Dr. Anjan Shah, a paediatric cardiologist from Oklahoma. His expertise and dedication to teaching provided me with profound insights into paediatric cardiology, particularly in the context of treating congenital heart conditions in resource-limited environments.



Figure 3. Taumeasina resort beach.



Figure 4. Fale (beach hut) on Savai'i island.

Beyond the clinical setting, I was fortunate to explore the natural beauty of Samoa, forming strong connections with fellow elective students. Together, we explored the island's stunning beaches and other attractions, which allowed us to unwind and deepen our appreciation for Samoa's cultural and natural heritage. These experiences were an integral part of my elective, and the friendships and memories created will be long cherished.

In summary, my clinical elective in Samoa was an immensely rewarding experience that afforded me a unique perspective on healthcare delivery in a resource-constrained environment. The challenges I encountered, such as the scarcity of essential medications and the high cost of healthcare, underscored the significant global health disparities that persist and reinforced the importance of resourcefulness, adaptability, and cultural sensitivity in clinical practice.

This experience has also solidified my commitment to contributing to healthcare in the Pacific region. The relationships I established with the local healthcare team and fellow students have inspired a strong desire to return to Samoa and continue contributing to its healthcare system.