

AMSF Travel Scholarship Report

Recipient: Afsana Hasan

Destination: Papua New Guinea



ADELAIDE MEDICAL
STUDENTS' FOUNDATION

There are some experiences in life that change you, experiences you will never forget. This was one of them.



Background

Papua New Guinea is a land rich in fascinating culture and lush landscapes. Due to its mountainous terrain, many different population groups exist, each with their own language (over 800), and within these provinces there are many different tribes. First contact with the Europeans was established in the early 16th century; however it was only until later in the 19th century that missionaries and tradesmen settled on the island. As a result, many of the locals still live by traditional and simple means. This was particularly noticeable in the rural highlands of Kompiam, in Enga Province, where I spent 4 weeks at the local district hospital.



Kompam District Hospital

Kompam District Hospital, along with 10 other health centres and aid posts, is a part of the Enga Baptist Health Services, facilitated by the Baptist Union of Papua New Guinea. It is a small 34 bed facility, servicing a catchment population of around 60, 000 people with an operational cost of just \$8, 000 per month. Their services include inpatient and outpatient medical care, elective and emergency surgery, obstetric deliveries, maternal and child health clinics, radiological services and occupational therapy. It is also the major supply base and centre for all preventative health care programs in Kompam.



Dr David Mills

The hospital's medical superintendant and Adelaide University graduate, Dr David Mills, was an endless source of inspiration and awe. He frequently took on the role of paediatrician, general physician, infectious diseases specialist, anaesthetist, occupational therapist, radiographer, radiologist and expert in all surgical fields (including general surgery, orthopaedics, plastics, obstetrics and gynaecology, ophthalmology, breast and endocrine) within the same day. Furthermore, he is a multi-talented plumber, electrician and builder who simultaneously manages the hospital with limited funds, and is becoming increasingly involved in improving the healthcare system throughout PNG. Despite his many commitments, he always put aside time to teach us and give us hands-on opportunities to improve our skills.

Medical opportunities

Through this elective, I was given the opportunity to see and manage a wide variety of tropical infectious diseases and severe surgical cases that I would otherwise not have encountered in Australia. Patients with malaria, typhoid and tuberculosis were admitted on a daily basis. There were many medically interesting late presentations of large abscesses involving the breast, face and limbs. It was commonplace to have patients presenting with large limb lacerations and bony fractures as a result of conflict between and within tribes. These are typically inflicted using machetes or axes which many of the locals (including young children) carry to chop trees. I also learnt how to capture and develop radiographs, practiced my ultrasound technique and improve my suturing skills. The highlight of the elective was being given more responsibility and the confidence to work independently, by conducting my own ward rounds, performing minor procedures in theatre and being the anaesthetist for many operations. It gave me a much greater awareness of the broad range of conditions that exist in medicine and a better appreciation of the luxuries we have in developed country, such as first-class facilities, specialists on-call and mountains of medical supplies.



Local life

The people of Kompam were very friendly and welcomed me into their village and lives. Weekends were spent going down to the river with the local children for a swim or playing a game of soccer. The trips to the market to buy vegetables and fruit were always an interesting experience. Fifty pairs of eyes would stop and follow as I browsed through the produce laid out on the ground. Similarly, there was often a small audience at the bedside and patient care was somewhat public. A typical scene would include five onlookers watching intensely as I drained ascites, children hovering around as I attempted to make a Kleinert dynamic splint, family of other patients helping interpret the patient's history for me. The language barrier was often a challenge and I frequently required two translators; one to translate Engan (the language of Enga province) to Pidgin English (the country's trade language), and another to translate that into English. However, I soon learnt a few key phrases to get by.

The greatest challenge of all was the day-long hike through the mountainous terrain to the Lapalama health centre where we spent a week refurbishing an old missionary house to be used for medical student accommodation. The hike certainly pushed me to my limits. The most humbling thought was that a person with a fractured humerus would have no choice but to make that same trek, in a state of severe pain and debilitation, in order to seek treatment. One thing I will never forget is the sheer resilience of the locals, their heart-warming generosity and their happiness and satisfaction with what they had in life.





Lessons learnt

The level of health I witnessed in PNG is what the majority of the population of the world experiences. Diseases I encountered in PNG may have been unusual in Adelaide, but globally the leading cause of deaths are infectious and parasitic diseases (17.3 million per year)¹. Through this placement I have gained: a broader overview of global medicine, its affect on the lives of people and the interplay of cultural factors; a better understanding for the logistics of healthcare delivery (building a bridge is more valuable than donating a CT scanner); and creative skills for working in resource-poor settings (making medical equipment out of scraps, such as an inhaler spacer out of an old saline bottle).



This incredible experience would not have been possible without the generosity of the AMSF and its sponsors. I would like to thank them for giving me the means to embark on this memorable adventure.



¹World health report 1998 press kit. *50 Facts: Global health situation and trends 1955-2025*. World Health Organisation. Accessed at 30 December 2012, <http://www.who.int/whr/1998/media_centre/50facts/en/>