

Royal Medical Society – Travel and Study Report

Paediatrics in St Vincent, 2018

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I undertook my medical elective in Milton Cato Memorial Hospital in St Vincent and the Grenadines. The hospital was located in Kingstown, the capital of St Vincent. My time was divided between surgical paediatrics and medical paediatrics equally.

St Vincent is a Caribbean island with a population of approximately 110,000. The main hospital on the island, Milton Cato Memorial Hospital, has 200 beds and offers a variety of specialties. Although St Vincent is very close to the luxury tourist islands of Barbados and St Lucia, it doesn't have the same degree of tourism or economic development. This served two purposes: the first was that I hoped it would keep living costs down; the second was that I anticipated a slightly different patient demographic and spectrum of diseases.

Healthcare in St Vincent is free at the point of contact but health insurance is needed for further care. Prescriptions are free if the drug is stocked by the hospital, but otherwise patients need to pay. Life expectancy is around 75 years. Some of the most prevalent clinical presentations are diabetes and, in the paediatric population, cooking oil burns.

Whilst away, there were a few clinical cases that really hit home for me. There were two stand out cases that concerned a lack of resources. The first involved a 3 year old boy who had chronic kidney disease secondary to kidney dysplasia. He had been admitted to the ward with hypertension and was to be managed with medication and rest. Unfortunately he didn't like taking tablets and was very energetic, meaning his blood pressure continued to stay elevated. In the UK the definitive management would have been further investigations into his kidney function before performing a transplant. These services weren't available on St Vincent, and so he needed to go to Trinidad. This would be quite a financial undertaking for the family and unfortunately meant that the operation was being delayed, increasing his risk of secondary organ damage.

The second case was a 7 month old boy with Down's Syndrome who had presented with breathlessness and increased respiratory effort. It transpired that he had atrial septal defects and a patent ductus arteriosus. In the UK this would have been identified at birth, with the child followed up regularly and worked up for surgery. In St Vincent the child had not been reviewed by a cardiologist since birth and the earliest appointment was February 2019 because there was no full-time cardiologist on the island. Both of these cases demonstrated an aspect of health economics that is less prevalent in the UK, and it was difficult knowing that although treatment was available, it was inaccessible.

Another memorable, yet harrowing case concerned a 15 year old girl who had been admitted following 'strange behaviour'. She had a complex social history and had been raped twice, once at the age of just 5. She was under the care of psychiatry, but unfortunately this was an under-staffed specialty in the hospital and so she had not been reviewed. All other healthcare staff were reluctant to see her, at times calling her crazy, and often seemed dismissive. This acted as an interesting insight into the attitude to mental health in St Vincent. The contrast was thrown into sharp focus as this case was around the time of mental health awareness week in the UK. Posts on social media

prompted me to reflect on how important it is to acknowledge and deal with mental health issues, something that I didn't see in St Vincent much to the detriment of patient care.

Outwith the time I spent in the hospital, St Vincent and the neighbouring islands had a lot to offer. At the weekends I climbed La Soufriere, the volcano on the island, and visited some beautiful waterfalls, as well as going to see some sets used in Pirates of the Caribbean. Another weekend I visited Bequia, one of the Grenadine islands, which was idyllic. I was also able to take a long weekend and chartered a sailing boat for 3 days with some other elective students. In that time we visited some of the further Grenadine islands famed for their white sandy beaches and opportunities to swim with wild turtles.

Overall my elective experience was enriching and memorable. Experiencing a different culture made me appreciate the importance of respecting people from different backgrounds with different views on healthcare. I also developed a new-found respect for the NHS and the impressive work it does, even with constant funding issues. Following my time in paediatrics I am confident that it's the career I would like to pursue and I'm grateful for the further exposure my elective granted me. My elective far surpassed my expectations and was the experience of a lifetime.