

ELECTIVE (SSC5b) REPORT (1200 words)

A report that addresses the above four objectives should be written below. Your Elective supervisor will assess this.

Background to Belize and Belmopan

Belize, formerly known as British Honduras, is a country on the East coast of Central America. It has Mexico to its north, Guatemala to its south and west, and the Caribbean Sea to the east. Its population of around 400,000 makes it the most scarcely populated country in the region, however its population is growing at a high rate in comparison to its neighbours. Belize is a rich and varied nation, made up of a melting pot of numerous cultures and languages. Belize is unique in that it is considered both a Caribbean and a Central American country.

Whilst English is the official language of Belize, Belizean Creole is an unofficial native language, which descends from English and came about due to the mixing of languages between British Imperialists and West African Slaves. Spanish is also commonly spoken, due to Belize's borders with Guatemala and Mexico. For this reason, most of the population (impressively) is multilingual.

For me, the predominance of English and commonly spoken Spanish was perfect. Whilst I studied Spanish at school and have an intermediate proficiency, I would not have been confident speaking it in a medical setting. My placement in Belize allowed me to converse with patients and doctors in Spanish but ultimately the most important conversations were in English. I still feel my Spanish improved vastly over the course of 6 weeks, which is another reason I value my time spent in Belize so highly.

Belmopan is the capital city of Belize but has the smallest population of any capital city in the Americas, at around 20,000. It usurped Belize City's capital city status in 1970 as the country sought to build a city less susceptible to destruction by hurricanes.

Local healthcare system and how it works, compared to the NHS

The healthcare system in Belize has recently been restructured into four regions; Northern, Central, Western and Southern. This was done to decentralise the management of healthcare.

There are both public and private systems of healthcare, much like the United Kingdom. Public health services are provided in the most part by the governmental Ministry of Health. Public health services are not free in all instances; they instead aim to provide free or affordable healthcare to most Belizeans. Unfortunately, many of the poorest of the population still cannot access care, namely those who live in the Southern region of Belize and South Belize City.

The private healthcare system provides for a smaller percentage (around 15%) of the population. It provides some tertiary care and imaging services which are not available publicly. However, unlike in the United Kingdom, the cost is not too dissimilar to public health services, and in some instances the Ministry of Health will pay on the patient's behalf.

The Karl Heusner Memorial Hospital, located in Belize City, is the only public hospital in the country to provide tertiary health care services. This is a similar concept to regions of the United Kingdom with centres of excellence which serve large geographical areas, containing other district general hospitals and teaching hospitals. It stands alone in Belize with its services in neurosurgery, interventional cardiology, neurology and cardiothoracic surgery.

As well as hospitals, there are also community-based health centres, polyclinics and health posts. These are crucial for providing care to the rural population. They tend to be staffed by a health nurse (occasionally a physician as well), or several members of staff in a polyclinic. As well as providing rudimentary treatment for minor ailments, these allow education of the local communities. This involves a wide range of issues, including the perinatal period and care in infancy. They are a rough equivalent of having local General Practice, as they treat more simple ailments and refer to hospitals as and when required.

Challenges to the local healthcare system and most common diseases, compared to NHS

Due to lack of financial resources, many of the hospitals in Belize (especially in those outside of Belize City and in rural areas) suffer regularly from inadequate staffing and a lack of equipment and medicine. This leads to long waiting times for appointments. Rural areas also suffer from a lack of emergency services. People suffering from serious or complex problems often have to travel abroad for their care, usually to neighbouring Guatemala or Mexico.

To provide perspective on the financial restrictions, healthcare spending in the United Kingdom is around \$4000 per capita. In comparison, in Belize it is around \$240. This is due to a smaller economy and high levels of poverty and unemployment, which means the government has less funds at its disposal to run the public healthcare system.

Another challenge is the cultural tendency to use non-evidence based traditional medicinal methods, rather than seeking public health services. This is also more pronounced in rural areas. An example of one of the indigenous groups to whom this applies is the Maya population. They continue to live according to their millennia-old traditions and are well-known in the healthcare sector for their reluctance to seek care in hospitals and community health centres.

The most common cause of death is ischaemic heart disease, which is the same as the UK. However, interpersonal violence and HIV/AIDS are the 3rd and 5th most common causes, which is a stark contrast to the United Kingdom.

What my placement involved

My elective was a placement in internal medicine at the Western Regional Hospital in the Western healthcare region of Belize. This is a publicly funded hospital which serves a large geographical catchment area. There are 50 beds and 10 doctors. Both primary and secondary care services are offered here, including gynaecology, surgery, psychiatry and paediatrics. Remarkably the Western Regional is one of only three Belizean hospitals with an operating theatre. However, orthopaedic trauma cases still require transfer to Belize City.

Most of the doctors in Western Regional Hospital originated from Belize. However, most commonly local doctors would train abroad, in places such as Cuba, before returning for work.

Western Regional Hospital provides simple blood tests and scans such as ultrasound and X-ray. However, in contrast to the NHS, these were difficult and slow to obtain for the patient due to lack of resources. More advanced imaging such as CT scans and magnetic resonance imaging was not available and required transfer to Belize City.

My work involved shadowing various members of staff on the General Ward, clerking patients for improvement of my own clinical skills and assisting on the ward round. This provided a markedly different experience to performing similar tasks in London. Firstly, experiencing a hospital of such small size was a shock to me, especially given the huge catchment area it has. I have been to GP surgeries in London with more doctors! Secondly, working in a much more resource-starved setting was a bit of a surprise. Finding simple equipment such as blood pressure measuring machines was a struggle and took up a frustrating proportion of my day. However, I still found this experience fascinating and extremely rewarding. It made me think about my own career path in the future and consider life outside of the NHS, where doctors are so desperately needed.