

ELECTIVE (SSC5b) REPORT (1200 words)

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

Primary Care in Rural Malawi

World Medical Fund is a charity that believes every child has a right to healthcare. They offer medical care to those in remote villages who may not previously have been able to travel to the nearest hospital. They work hand in hand with the local community using their mobile clinic to visit each village on a 4 weekly clinic.

1. To ascertain the impact of Malaria within Nkhotakota whilst acknowledging its pattern and impact across the rest of Malawi and worldwide.

Whilst working with World Medical Fund we were able to see patients who otherwise may not have been brought to hospital. This is a unique opportunity to practice primary care in rural villages, in a country where the mainstay of medical treatment is either traditional healers or secondary care.

It is fair to say that during our many clinic visits to different villages, one of the primary differentials to rule out was malaria. Since we were visiting at the tail end of the rainy season, rates of malaria were expected to be particularly high.

It soon became apparent that malaria was to be one of the most common complaints that we would treat. Since there are a variety of symptoms associated with malaria, we tended to err on the side of caution with regards to testing. Any child who presented with a fever would be sent for Malaria Rapid Diagnostic Test (MRDT) as their next port of call following history and examination. The number coming back as positive varied largely between clinics. On average, roughly 2/3 of children seen would come back positive for malaria and would be treated accordingly. Interestingly, there was one clinic in particular that stuck in my mind as very few of the children came back as positive. Had we been at WMF for longer, it would have been interesting to audit the number of cases and also look into how many children test positive every month.

2. Describe tropical disease services within Malawi, looking at similarities and differences to the UK.

The services for tropical disease will be more thoroughly described in the following objective. For Malawi, tropical diseases are just the norm. They are some of the most common presentations to medical care, alongside respiratory tract infections and gastroenteritis.

In the UK, the treatment of tropical diseases is much more centralised. That is because the number of cases are much lower and only a result of people entering with them from other countries. As a country with more than sufficient resources, we are able to fully investigate symptoms that patients present with and treat them appropriately. Due to limited resources here, particularly in the field, some diseases are treated purely on clinical symptoms which are not particularly specific.

3. Looking at public health strategies for reducing the burden of tropical diseases in Nkhotakota

The main tropical diseases seen in Nkhotakota and the surrounding areas are similar to those seen in the rest of Malawi. There were a huge variety which we could treat for regularly with Malaria being one of the most common and also severe. The public health strategies aimed at targeting Malaria include the distribution of mosquito nets. Many charities help with this. However, unfortunately, nets appear to have found 'more useful' purposes. Many are used as fishing nets, as toilet curtains, around crops to protect them from animals, amongst others. Whilst this type of prevention doesn't seem to be successful with all, other strategies involve early treatment. The government funds free MRDT testing in those presenting with symptoms of malaria and treatment is available from rural clinics, pharmacies and outreach clinics such as ours.

Another 2 tropical disease that was a clinical diagnosis, due to not having testing facilities in the field, were worms and schistosomiasis. With regards to worms, our primary cause for concern was a slightly hard, distended abdomen. Occasionally presenting with non-specific abdominal pain. Public health strategies for both of these include health education. With regards to schistosomiasis, as travellers, we are advised to avoid swimming in contaminated fresh water such as Lake Malawi. If it is necessary to do so, then Praziquantel should be taken 4 weeks after exposure. That is all very well for those of us who are visiting but is clearly not feasible for those who live by The Lake. Although clean water can be obtained from pumps situated close to the villages, it is usual to see children playing in the lake and clothes being washed there. Such things are difficult to prevent. Other strategies include de-reeding of areas, thus destroying the habitat of schistosomiasis and preventing the spread. This has reportedly been successful with some areas of Lake Malawi claiming to be free of schistosomiasis with annual testing of lake water in the area confirming this.

4. To maximise teamwork when it may become challenging due to cultural differences

Having previously spent time working in Malawi, I was aware of the fact that cultural differences can often cause unexpected challenges in reaching an end goal. Having a background knowledge of Malawi and their culture, I thought I would be well placed to manoeuvre these differences. What I underestimated was the difference that the addition of medical knowledge and protocols would make.

One example of a challenging situation was when I saw a 13 year old girl who had a large unilateral neck swelling. Upon translation, it also transpired that she was complaining of genital sores and discharge. In the U.K. this would be dealt with very sensitively and privately. In Malawi, the clinical officer in charge of us told me that we should just treat her for an STI. I was unhappy with this as we didn't have a thorough history nor had we carried out an examination. I convinced him that this would be the appropriate thing to do but still had to push in order for this to be a private, chaperoned and consented examination. Occasions like this could prove frustrating and make teamwork more challenging as our goal was the same but beliefs on how to correctly go about it differed.