

## **ELECTIVE (SSC5b) REPORT (1200 words)**

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

**Objective 1:** I aim to gain a deep understanding of the diseases that affect the rural communities of Panama. Further, I plan to gain a good understanding of the culture of the area and the impact this has on attitudes towards health.

Panama is a country in Central America, home to around 4 million people. It has both Caribbean and Pacific coasts and for this reason enjoys a varied climate and diverse population & culture. We spent our time at in the Bocas Del Toro region on the Caribbean coast of Panama, about 12 hours drive from the capital, Panama city. We spent our time visiting rural communities, often only accessible by boat and often only having access to medicine when either the Floating Doctors organisation or government outreach organisations visited once or twice a year. Before we began our time with the organisation, we were provided extensive reading materials concerning the common conditions that were seen in the clinics. The conditions prioritized by the treatment guidelines included common conditions such as headache, gastrointestinal upset and upper respiratory tract infection, as well as conditions less known to me such as helminthic infections, Leishmaniasis, Scabies and Tuberculosis.

As we were seeing patients from rural communities, I was expecting tropical diseases to make up a large proportion of the disease burden. However, interestingly, Diabetes, cardiovascular disease and hypertension made up the majority of the disease burden in the area. We found that this was linked to the poor diets of these populations, with large sugar and fat intake.

Overall, the attitudes of patients towards healthcare professionals were positive. We did however find that patient compliance to medication was poor and patients often reported that they were not taking much of their medication. In one case, this was reported by the patient to be because he believed the tablets he had been given had gone bad in the humidity.

**Objective 2:** I aim to firstly understand what healthcare members of these rural communities normally receive by spending time with local medicine men. I then hope to gain a deep understanding of the effect Floating Doctors has on the community and its overall health.

Once arriving on base and being lucky enough to spend my first week at one of the most isolated communities, I quickly discovered that my pre-conceived ideas as to the culture and life of the local population were wrong. After reading in the guide sent out by floating doctors that we would be made aware of the care given by local medicine men, I assumed this played a greater part in local healthcare than it actually did. However, on arrival I discovered that these communities have access to western medicine in the form of Floating Doctors and government outreach programmes. When speaking to patients we discovered however that they did value the work done by the Floating Doctors, as we found out by the number of people seeking help at the clinics.

**Objective 3:** Global/Public Health related objective: An aspect of the health of developing countries that I find fascinating is the prevalence and impact that long term conditions such as diabetes, heart

disease & hypertension has. Overall I hope to understand what the greatest public health challenges facing Panama are.

I was surprised to find that long term conditions such as Diabetes were very common in the communities served by Floating Doctors. In fact, every adult and pregnant woman had their blood glucose tested, indicating just how common the condition was in that area. Following some more reading I was startled to find that Diabetes is in fact only slightly less prevalent in Panama as in the UK (7% Vs 9%) and in fact, the Bocas Del Toro region suffers from the worst mortality rates from Diabetes in the country.

This, alongside high rates of heart disease and hypertension, mean that Panama struggles with similar public health issues to the UK. There was great emphasis on delivering patient education and awareness of the symptoms of these long term conditions and on further discovery, I found that the Panamanian government itself runs large public health campaigns to attempt to curb the rise of these conditions.

When visiting these small rural communities it was staggering just how much of the disease burden was attributable to poor personal hygiene and lack of access to clean drinking water. This led to an endemic presence of intestinal worms, diarrhoea, scabies and in several communities, high rates of STDs. Simple patient education and access to clean water and barrier contraceptive measures would all but eradicate conditions such as these which comprised a large proportion of the clinics.

**Objective 4: Personal/professional development objective:** Having studied for 6 years in London, I am extremely excited to undertake this elective. I hope that I learn life lessons and gain a valuable new perspective. Another development goal I have set myself and am undertaking is to develop a level of Spanish language that would be sufficient to undertake a basic consultation.

I had a wonderful time at Floating Doctors, I learnt a huge amount and was lucky enough to meet a great number of people that I could learn from. The two weeks have provided me with invaluable experience regarding different cultures, attitudes as well as understanding how medical care can be delivered in a resource poor setting. I saw fascinating cases, both chronic and very acute and was able to deliver a case presentation to everyone on the base concerning a deteriorating pregnant patient who we eventually had to send via boat to the closest hospital – which was 2 hours away.

I was able to use the Spanish I had learnt throughout the year, but only in informal conversations. Quite correctly, the organisation had guidelines that stated that only fluent Spanish speakers could act as translators or take consultations themselves with the local population. It was however, excellent practice for when I will inevitably have to use a translator in my future medical practice.

I hope to take all of the lessons I have learnt during my time with the Floating Doctors forward into my future career.