

ELECTIVE (SSC5b) REPORT (1200 words)

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

1.) What are the provisions available on these islands compared with that of the UK

Panama has health care systems funded by the government and private healthcare. However, I didn't have any first hand experience in either of these settings. On floating doctors we were treating the Ngöbe people, the indigenous population of Panama. Each day we would travel to communities on a number of the 364 islands of Bocas Del Toros. These communities are forgotten by the Panamanian government.

On the island of Bocas there were no medical provision. Sometimes communities had one elderly lady that had witnessed many births who acted as a surrogate midwife. These communities lived in poverty and most had no money to travel to the mainland to seek medical help if they needed. Therefore, a lot of the floating doctors were the only health professionals they saw. We had no laboratory so we could not take bloods or swabs. We took stethoscopes, BP cuffs, oximeters, Hb machines (for pregnant women only as not many slides), glucometers, speculums, Snellen chart and glasses, an ECG machine and an ultrasound kit. Although the US kit was only useful to see if someone was pregnant or not as no one was trained in anything else at this time. In terms of treatment we took a variety of medications that had been bought and donated for common conditions (see objective 2). If we thought a patient needed something more specialised like an X-ray, CT or simple bloods before taking an anti-fungal medication we could take them back on our small boat and try to get them treated in the hospital. However, it meant we would have to leave them at the hospital and they would often have to find their own way back. If they had no money we could provide them with some for transport. If they are out of the catchment area they would have to pay for the night and any tests in the hospital which floating doctors can also help with. Many of the indigenous people don't speak Spanish so we also tried to provide an interpreter where needed.

Other than stories, the only experience I had with the local hospital was writing two referral letters. In central America there is a point system just like we have in the UK. One of the lowest scoring places to get into is Panama. The lowest scoring hospital in Panama, Bocas Del Toros. Therefore, no one wants to be placed there and it has a very poor standard of care. I was also informed that the hospitals were extremely racist towards the indigenous people and it was likely they wouldn't treat them. I've heard stories of doctors in this hospital just shaking their head at the Ngöbe and not treating them. Or of an acutely unwell child with systemic TB attending and they wouldn't do any tests. They just belittled the mother, told her she was not looking after her child properly, gave her vitamins and asked her to leave. Therefore, I should write down and tests I thought the patient needed clearly in the hope someone would read the letter.

2. What are the prevalent conditions on the tropical islands off Boca Del Tores compared to England

The conditions we were taught to look out for included Zika virus, Dengue fever, Chikungunya, yellow fever, Leishmaniasis and malaria. These conditions are found in tropical climates rather than countries like England. However, they were not all prevalent. The most common conditions that I saw on the islands was Leishmaniasis, common colds, headaches, worms, diarrhoea and fungal infections. Leishmaniasis is a parasitic disease spread by sandflies. It presents as an ulcerated lesion. It can be on

the skin, mucosa or viscerally. It is found in tropical climates unlike England. After a careful history, I found most of the headaches were due to dehydration as most of the patients drank no water at all and sometimes only a cup of coffee a day. If asked, most patients would admit to having diarrhoea. It is thought that most of the people in the community have worms as well. Therefore, it is difficult to distinguish whether the diarrhoea is from the worms or another cause. This is where history skills were key.

The more senior doctors thought that Tuberculosis and HIV were very common throughout the communities. This was because there were resistant coughs with fevers, widespread fungal infections and other conditions only immunocompromised patients may get. However, there was no way of test for these disease. This would be a project I would like to carry out in the future.

3. To gain confidence in practical and clinical skills in an environment when resources are low

As aforementioned, resources were very scarce. Even if a patient could be sent to the hospital in Bocas Del Toros, the hospital did not have simple tests such as liver function tests or lactate. It quickly became apparent that clinical examinations were the main stay of investigations. This meant I practised all my clinical examinations most weeks. A day wouldn't go by I didn't do an abdominal, respiratory or cardiovascular examination. I learnt to trust my findings, for example, pale conjunctiva for anemia as I couldn't order a Hb. I became competent at recognising normal lung sounds and very fine crackles. Although I recognised my limitations, I am now more confident in my clinical examinations.

Practical skills I performed include depot injections, speculum examination, blood glucose and iron readings and peak flows. I performed these skills many times and am much more confident in them.

4. What are the main conditions that are treated prophylactically in Panama compared with the UK

In the communities I was working in the only prophylactic used was albendazole for worms. If one family was symptomatic for worms the rest of the people living in the house would be given a prophylactic dose. We also gave depot injections as birth control. Much of the time the women were very reluctant to accept the injections, especially in front of the men as it is thought their role in life from a young age is to have children.