

ELECTIVE (SSC5b) REPORT (1200 words)

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

SSC5b Elective report

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Objective 1: Describe the pattern of disease/illness of interest in the population with which you will be working and discuss this in the context of global health: What are the common obstetric and gynaecological conditions found in Belize and how do these compare to those in the UK?

Belize is a country found on the East Coast of Central America. It is bordered by Mexico in the North and Guatemala in the South. It is a diverse country with many different climates and terrains, the Caribbean coast on its Eastern sea border, tropical forests and Mayan mountains to name a few. Many different ethnic groups can also be found, including the Kriols (Creoles), three Maya groups, the Garinagu, Mestizos and German speaking Mennonites. Each group comes with its own distinct culture and belief system surrounding healthcare, as well as strong religious beliefs, so provides a really interesting challenge for the delivery of Western medicine. It has the lowest population density in Central America at 468,310 (2015) with many people living in rural areas far from hospitals.

Diseases that represent a large burden on the healthcare system in Belize are viruses spread via mosquitoes, namely the Aedes species. These include Dengue, Chikungunya and Zika. The latter, of which there has been a recent epidemic in Central and South America, is of particular concern in the obstetric setting. It can cause serious harm to the unborn foetus by interfering with the normal development of the brain, resulting in microcephaly. This can often prove fatal, and for those foetuses that do survive, they are left with severe disability and huge care needs. The other problem with Zika is that it is also transmitted sexually, and may remain in semen for up to six months. Women across Central and South America that live in high risk areas are given advice and counselling about the virus, how it is transmitted, the risk to the pregnancy and options for contraception.

There is a real effort by the government in Belize to educate people on bite prevention. Measures such as wearing long clothes in the evening when the mosquitoes are at their most active and making sure bodies of water such as tanks/ buckets/ etc. are not left out as a breeding ground are simple, cheap and effective methods to reduce transmission. The government also provides mosquito nets for beds and insect repellent free of charge.

Belize has the highest rates of HIV in Central America with 1.5% of 15 – 49 year olds affected. It is estimated that around 1700 women aged over 15 years old are infected. There is still a strong stigma attached to the disease which creates a barrier to education and accessing healthcare. There is a National AIDS Programme, a public health scheme set up by the Ministry of Health, which is reducing prevalence through the voluntary counselling and testing programme, as well as improving access to antiretrovirals. Expecting mothers are counselled on the risk of vertical transmission and ways in which this can be reduced, for example through the use of ARVs throughout pregnancy and caesarean section delivery.

Similarly to the UK, chronic conditions such as diabetes, obesity and COPD are on the rise in Belize, meaning more women are having high risk pregnancies. Health education and close monitoring are so important to reduce potentially serious complications to both mother and baby.

Objective 2: Describe the pattern of health provision in relation to the country which you will be working and contrast this with other countries, or with the UK: How is pre, peri and post natal care delivered by Western Regional Hospital? Is this representative of maternal care throughout Belize? How does this compare to the provision of obstetric care in the UK?

Health provision is a mixture of both public and private, with the Ministry of Health providing free healthcare for everyone. A national health insurance scheme was introduced in 2001 to improve access to healthcare. Belize is separated into four health regions (northern, central, western, and southern health region), aimed at targeting specific healthcare needs to the populations they cover. Similarities can be drawn with the NHS in that the UK is split into CCGs which assess the local needs of the population.

Each region has its own primary and secondary care facilities, along with a tertiary centre. Belmopan belongs to the western region and provides secondary services including internal medicine, surgery, obstetrics and paediatrics. There is also another secondary centre, San Ignacio community hospital, nearby which provides further maternity services. Common presentations to hospital during pregnancy include postpartum haemorrhage, deep vein thrombosis and eclampsia/preeclampsia. The tertiary centre in the western region is found in Belize City. A large portion of the health budget goes here as many people come from very low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Objective 3: Health related objective: How does public health play a role in reducing maternal mortality? What improvements can be made?

Belize is a low – middle income country. An estimated 44% of the population live below the poverty line. This gives rise to a lot of the health problems faced by Belizeans such as hypertension, diabetes and obesity. Public health initiatives are largely aimed at working with communities to educate them on healthy living, such as reducing fat and salt intake in a notoriously unhealthy diet. This comes with its difficulties as health beliefs vary widely between different ethnic groups and there is a degree of mistrust of western medicine.

The introduction of the yellow fever and measles vaccination has had tremendous results in reducing prevalence of these diseases. The difficulty lies in reaching the more rural and self contained populations around the country.

Objective 4: Personal/professional development goals: I plan to work abroad in my future career, especially in areas with low resources, so would like to gain early experience. I also speak Spanish so would like to hone my communication skills.

It was interesting to experience the delivery of medicine in a resource poor setting. I made me appreciate how fortunate we are to have the NHS and all the services it provides. For example Western Regional Hospital only has one CT scanner, which means patients have long waits for much needed scans. Equipment and laboratory tests that we take for granted in Britain were few and far between, so more emphasis was put on clinical medicine.

One thing that I discovered is that the people of Belize have a wide knowledge of herbal medicines and the use of local flora for medicinal use. It was amazing to hear about all the different plants and fruits and how they are used to make tonics, pastes and even dressings to cure all sorts of maladies. A lot of this knowledge has been passed down from generation to generation and for many people, especially those in more rural settings, forms the majority of their healthcare.

Overall I found this experience challenging and rewarding and I look forward to using what I have learnt in Belize to good practice in my coming career.