

ELECTIVE (SSC5b) REPORT (1200 words)

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

What are the most common medical problems in Belize? How do they differ to the UK?

Some of the most pressing medical problems currently in Belize are infectious diseases. More recently, Zika has become a large issue. Zika is spread by mosquito bite and can also be transmitted sexually for 6-8 months after infection. It can also be passed from mother to fetus causing birth defects.

One of the problems the hospitals experience when they think a patient is presenting with Zika is that they are unable to test anyone other than the pregnant or elderly as it is too expensive. Instead they treat them symptomatically for fever and joint pain and give oral rehydration salts.

Other infectious diseases that are a problem in Belize are:

- **Dengue fever** – this is spread through mosquito's that are often rife around stagnant water. This is also treated symptomatically and in severe cases it can cause liver damage and shock. The Western Regional Hospital is able to test for this in hospital.
- **Chikungunya**
- **Malaria** – spread by mosquitos and prevented by preventing mosquito bites with repellent and nets. It is regularly tested for in the hospital.
- **Chagas' disease** – a parasite that causes an acute mild phase that may be asymptomatic. The acute phase can last up to a month and can cause a skin reaction, eyelid swelling and is easily mistaken for other diseases. The chronic phase can last for years and can be fatal. It affects nerves, causes heart dilatation and murmurs. It is worse in those who are immunocompromised. It is prevented by insecticide use and its prevalence is decreasing.

Other issues facing healthcare in Belize include diabetes and poor nutrition. A large amount of the diet in Belize is fried, specifically two delicacies – fried pork skin and fried pig tails. Both of these are very salty and have little nutritional value other than fat. Because of this many hospitals are employing nutritionists to help sit down to speak to patients. The hope is that patients will find them easier to relate to than the doctor, and so hopefully heed their advice.

What is the health care system in Belize? How does this differ from the UK?

The main similarity between health care in Belize and in the UK is that both are government funded. There are private healthcare facilities available to those who wish to pay however the majority of the population can access treatment with no direct cost.

Healthcare in Belize is accessed through satellite clinics in communities; poly clinics and hospitals. Healthcare is split into four regions:

- The Northern Health Region serves a population of just under 78,000. The hospitals in the Northern region cover a wider area and are further from other tertiary centres. There are two hospitals in the Northern Region, the larger regional hospital has 57 beds and the Community hospital has only 30 beds.
- The Central Region hosts The Karl Heusner Memorial Hospital. This is a regional and national referral hospital, so patients with conditions unable to be managed in other hospitals can be sent here. The hospital often has too many referrals and so there is pressure on other hospitals to be selective with who they refer there. This hospital has 115 beds with labour and delivery theatres plus an additional three surgical theatres. There are two other private hospitals in the Central Region.

Belize City is the most densely populated city in Belize and falls within the Central Region. Belize city has a higher level of violent crime than other cities which also puts an extra strain on the hospitals in this region.

- The Western Region has two hospitals – Western Regional Hospital in the capital city of Belmopan and where my elective was based, and San Ignacio Hospital. Western Regional Hospital is the largest with 50 beds while San Ignacio Hospital has 16 beds. In addition to this, there are 3 urban health centres and one rural health centre.

Western Regional Hospital has a total of 14 doctors. This has increased from 2010 where there were only 6. The current doctors and specialists include two paediatricians, three obstetricians/gynaecologists, two general medics, one nutritionist and one psychiatrist.

- The Southern Region has two public hospitals – the Southern Regional hospital which has 52 beds and two main wards, and the Punta Gorda Hospital which has 30 beds.

In the Southern Region, there is a district called the Toledo District. This district only has one major town but is very far south and far from the nearest hospital. A lot of the population in the district are more indigenous and have their own indigenous medical practices. This makes it more difficult to convince them to use Western medical techniques.

Similarly, to the UK, Belize suffers with problems of understaffing within their hospitals. There is a shortage of midwives in Belize and currently a shortage of doctors to cover the needs of all the hospitals. A large amount of health care professionals leave Belize to go to other countries, such as Trinidad to work where their salary is higher.

What are the main focus of public health initiatives in Belize?

There are many public health initiatives in Belize that have helped to decrease the incidence of disease. 5 years ago, there was a large campaign to raise awareness of Chagas' disease. In this campaign they put a large picture of the parasite in the San Ignacio stadium so that large numbers of the public would see it and become aware of it. They also had a campaign where if the parasite was seen, a home public health team would come to eradicate the home and screen all those living there for the disease. Since then, the disease has become less common, however due to immigration between other countries it can easily be brought into Belize.

Public health teams are also used to help educate citizens about getting rid of Dengue fever. They advise against getting ridding of stagnant water in homes, and the use of insect repellents and nets.

Whilst staying in Belize I also saw an advert on the TV educating people about Zika. The advert gave a brief overview of what Zika was, how it was spread, how it could be prevented and the symptoms and damage it can cause. It was all presented in a cartoon form and was very informative to those watching it.

The Ministry of Health in Belize also publicises events such as 'No Tobacco Day', 'World Water Day', 'Mosquito Awareness Week', and 'World Health Day – Depression'. They encourage hospitals and communities to promote different problems and diseases to encourage conversation and education about the subjects and help to prevent diseases.

Personal experience working in a developing country.

I found the Western Regional Hospital quite surprising. Although I was expecting the hospital to be small I don't think I was fully prepared for how small it would be, and hearing that there were only 14 doctors really shocked me. I was aware that healthcare in Belize would be a lot different from that in the UK, but the scale of it was still a surprise. I found it interesting to learn how the doctors here dealt with a lack of staff, equipment, space and money and were still able to treat patients to a high standard of care. I think I will be able to draw from the experience and resourcefulness of the doctors when in full time work next year.

Whilst there I learnt that I may be more competent than I sometimes realise regarding being able to manage patients and formulate plans of what they need. I learnt to be more confident in my abilities and to throw myself into experiences more.