

Elective Report

Introduction

I decided to do my six week elective in Brisbane, Australia. I chose Australia as I was keen to use the long length of time I had to travel somewhere further afield and where I had not been before. In addition, Australia was a country where there was no language barrier and where I felt safe to travel alone.

For the duration of my placement I was based in Ashgrove family practice, a busy GP surgery in a quiet suburb 5 miles from the city centre. I chose general practice as this is the career path I would like to follow and I was keen to see what it was like in a different country.

1. What are the most common presenting complaints in general practice in Australia and how does this compare to the UK?

The most common presenting complaints in general practice in Brisbane were generally very similar to those in the UK. The management of chronic diseases, in particular mental health, featured highly.

As in the UK, many asymptomatic patients would come to the surgery for a routine check-up. I was surprised by the frequency of these appointments in Australia as I had thought that the requirement to pay for appointments would deter these patients.

The most significant difference in presenting complaints in Australia compared with the UK was skin-related pathology. Many patients would come for a skin check or with specific worries over a particular lesion. In addition, it was common for patients to have had previous skin excisions, and many patients had a family history or personal history of skin cancer.

I also noticed that GPs in Brisbane had a more active role in managing pregnancy than in the UK. Pregnant patients would be seen regularly at the surgery as part of shared care.

2. How do the services provided by the GP surgery in Brisbane compare with those in the UK? What significant differences are there in both the structure and organisation of the practice, and the treatments provided?

The services provided by Ashgrove family practice in Brisbane were similar to those provided by surgeries in the UK. However, I did note that minor operations, in particular skin excisions and biopsies, were conducted at a greater frequency. In addition, the practice also employed a GP who was able to do more skilled minor operations such as excisions on the face and skin grafts.

In Brisbane, the GPs at the surgery would do the routine smear tests, rather than the practice nurses as is common in the UK. Smear tests tended to be combined with a breast examination and bimanual examination to rule out other pathology.

During my time as Ashgrove family practice, I noticed that the GPs tended to make more referrals to specialists than compared with the UK. When I asked the GP about this, she mentioned that part of the reason was associated with litigation surrounding late referrals and missed diagnoses.

I also noticed that there was better access to radiology and pathology services in Brisbane, and patients were usually able to have investigations on the same day as requested. In addition, GPs in Brisbane appeared to have access to a greater variety of medications for treating patients when compared with the UK.

The structure and organisation of Ashgrove family practice was akin to GP surgeries in the UK. The major difference was that patients had to pay for their appointments, and the amount charged was at the discretion of the GP.

3. Are there any differences in public health and its promotion between the UK and Australia?

Many aspects of public health in Brisbane were comparable to the UK. For instance, the immunisation schedule for infants was almost identical. The only differences were some minor variations on timings, an additional varicella vaccine is given in Australia, and the flu vaccine is given intranasal in the UK compared to intramuscular in Australia. Screening programmes in Australia are also very similar to the UK, with breast, bowel and cervical cancer all routinely screened for. In the UK, the flu vaccination is free and only available to specific at-risk groups. However this is different in Australia as the vaccine is available to everyone at a small cost (around £10). Consequently, often young, healthy people would come in to be immunised. The vaccine was also advertised by chemists on the local radio.

In Brisbane, I noticed that patients tended to take a more active role in their health management when compared with the UK. Patients would regularly attend asking for blood test or a referral to a specialist, often giving the name of a specific doctor whom they wish to see.

In addition, there is unsurprisingly a much greater awareness of skin cancer in Australia. Patients frequently book in for skin checks and there is greater publicity and awareness of sun protection.

4. What are the challenges involved in doing an elective in Australia? What have I learnt from this experience?

During my six week placement at Ashgrove, I saw a wide variety of patients and diseases. As well as routine check-up appointments, smear test and vaccinations, I saw some more unusual presenting complaints such as erythema multiforme and Bell's palsy. I was able to observe the management of many different chronic health conditions, including mental health and chronic pain. I learnt more about non-pharmacological and holistic treatments for conditions, such as Pilates and acupuncture. I was also able to practice giving intramuscular injections and wound care. In addition I spent time observing and assisting with skin excisions and biopsies.

If I were to work in Australia, I think I would find it challenging charging patients for their appointments. Although patients can claim back most of the cost and thus only have to pay a small contribution, the concept of charging for GP appointments feels very strange. I think this is because I have only ever experienced healthcare provided by the NHS.

With regards to doing my elective in Australia, the biggest challenge I faced was the anxiety associated with going so far away, on my own, to a place where I initially did not know anyone. However, everyone at the surgery was very nice and I relaxed and felt at home after just a few days.

Overall I have really enjoyed my time in Brisbane. I feel I have learnt a lot and my confidence has grown enormously. I am extremely grateful to everyone at Ashgrove surgery for being so welcoming and friendly and helping to make my elective such a fantastic experience.