

The Haymarket Trust

Elective report; Northern District hospital,
Luganville, Vanuatu 2011,

by Paul Carruthers



Objectives;

- Compare common conditions encountered in Vanuatu with those found in the UK
- What healthcare provisions are available to the population of Vanuatu compared with the UK
- What age groups of patients are mostly affected, do they seek healthcare advice/clinics/check-ups
- What have I learnt from this experience that will make me a better doctor in the future?

Vanuatu is an archipelago of volcanic origin consisting of over 80 islands in the south pacific, over 1000 miles east of the northern tip of Australia. Discovered in 1605 by the Spanish, the islands were ruled from 1906 by a French-UK condominium, until their independence in 1980.

The main industries are small-scale agriculture, fishing, offshore financial services and tourism. The majority of the 250,000 strong Ni-Vanuatu population live in rural, isolated villages. Schooling in Vanuatu is not enforced and as a result there are relatively low levels of literacy among the general population. The result of this is a poor understanding of healthcare and without the internet, television or radio there is a limited ability to get information out to the population.

Commonly, young patients come in with traumatic injuries, as a result of the lack of health and safety equipment and adult supervision. These include scalp lacerations, fractures and infected wounds or abscesses. Malaria is common on the smaller islands, but as there are no healthcare provisions on these islands they travel to the hospital for treatment.

Conditions in the medical ward include fish poisoning, lung cancer, TB and asthma, which is on the increase in Vanuatu. This is probably due to the increase in pollutants from cars and also from the many open fires that can be seen around the island.

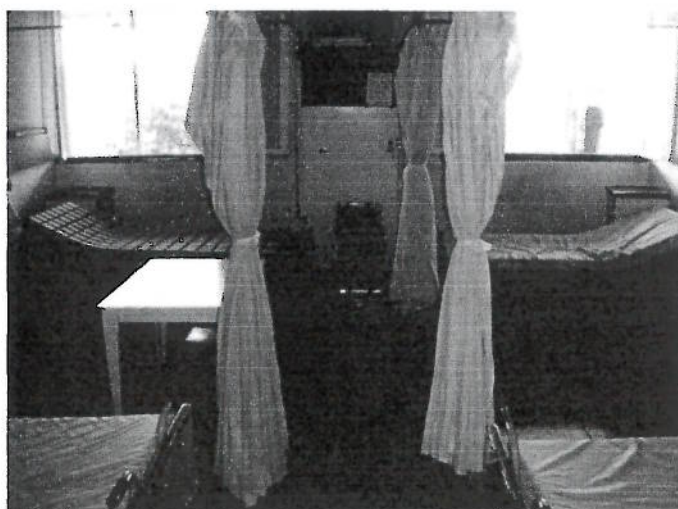
In the paediatric department there is pneumonia and meningitis, as well as malnutrition and bronchiolitis. Asthma is affecting younger patients too, though without regular check-ups and education about inhalers there is little that is currently done to prevent exacerbations of the disease.

Diabetes is on the rise as a result of the introduction of Western foods. Again, without the necessary education about the complications of the disease there are many potentially avoidable below knee amputations.

ENT clinics emphasise the poor knowledge about hygiene, with many perforations and middle ear infections, all the result of inappropriate objects being introduced to patients' ears. The constant swimming in the rivers or the sea compounding these problems further.

In adult clinics there is little understanding of basic physiology and many patients present with reflux or muscular pain, though these are both common presentations to GP's in the UK.

Eye problems, specifically related to UV over-exposure, are commonly encountered in Vanuatu with cataracts and pterygion being common in the elderly population.



The ITU department in the Northern District hospital, in Luganville, Vanuatu.

There are two hospitals in Vanuatu, one in the capital of Port Villa, the other in Luganville, on the island of Espiritu Santo. The healthcare provided in these hospitals is basic, with heavy dependence on visiting foreign doctors. There are some rural clinics that are run in the communities with health care provided by the hospitals. There are no regular check-ups and patients have to journey to a clinic or hospital when they are in need of medical attention.

There are some screening programmes that take place in some of the schools to screen the children for ENT and eye problems as well as providing sexual education.

As with most populations the age groups mostly affected with disease are the old and the young. Generally speaking healthcare is only sought after deterioration in physical condition or a patient being unable to carry out their daily activities. This is in contrast to the UK where a medical consultation may be sought regarding minor afflictions as well as for repeat prescriptions, check-ups and for sick notes.

The outpatient department



This experience has helped me develop some of my skills, in communicating with patients and developing a better understanding for how the provisions of healthcare differs dramatically from country to country, around the world. The provisions within the hospital may have been basic and the number of staff available quite low, but despite this a good level of care was able to be provided. This will benefit me in many ways when working in the NHS in the years to come. I have thoroughly enjoyed my time working in and with the people of Vanuatu and I hope that my contribution for the short time that I have been here has helped some of the patients and the staff in the hospital.



Working in the eye clinic