

A GENERAL
MEDICINE

Elective Report

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Elective Report:

On the morning of 11th April 2011, still jubilant from passing finals, I hauled myself and my sizeable backpack onto a rush hour district line train heading west. Emotional goodbyes were said at Heathrow. I cleared security and was now on my own. I exhaled heavily, elective had started.

The Queen of Spain was a fellow passenger on our flight from Madrid to New York. Perhaps this is why I was subject to some special attention by security at Madrid's Barajas airport. This, we will never actually know. Our flight passed without incident; no mile high good Samaritan acts were required, thankfully. On arrival in New York we settled into our budget accommodation on the upper west side. The polar opposites of wealth and deprivation living in disharmony were clear to see on the streets. Luxury apartments towered over "bums" begging for money for their HIV medication. This was New York, and the streets were supposed to be paved with gold.

Our jet lag helped with our early start. We headed for the Staten island ferry. We viewed Mrs Liberty from the sea and tried to imagine the thoughts of all those immigrants that passed under her shadow looking for a fresh start. My colleagues felt underwhelmed, she was dwarfish in real life compared to her portrayal on the silver screen.

The next few days we trod the tourist trail and enjoyed the sights, sounds, taste and smell of New York. We then drove upstate towards Boston, a four hour drive through leafy rural New England. It was raining and cold. There was a heat wave in England. We felt cheated. On arrival in Boston we headed to our hostel, home for the next 5 weeks. On check in we discovered we hadn't paid tax. Our budget was blown out of the air. (Note to self: Always add 25% to anything when going to the states. It is easier this way). That weekend we went to a Boston Red Sox game, an incredible day out with a lively but friendly atmosphere, on exiting the ground we were able to cheer on the exhausted runners of the Boston marathon at the finishing line before the frivolities carried on into the wee hours of Sunday morning.

On Monday, we headed to the Longwood medical area to embark on our elective proper. We met with our tutor, Prof. Subramanian and discussed our aims for the time we had with him. The sheer scale of the Harvard School of Public Health wowed us. The monstrous buildings were the size of the Royal London let alone the medical school itself. Inside, security was tight, we had to be formally checked and issued with id's before proceeding. We agreed with Subra to spend some of our time in Boston writing an article for the student BMJ on medical stats for students and junior doctors and some of the other time with his colleagues at Massachusetts General Hospital, one of the most famous hospitals in the world and birthplace of the New England Journal of Medicine. We spent a good afternoon with Subra, discussing the American health system, trying to grasp the political conflicts that have raged over President Obama's recent health bill. Most

Americans that we spoke to admitted that the US's health system's funding was one of the major downsides of living in America and that something had to change, just no one knew exactly how. We embarked on our article and were fascinated by working at the emergency room at MGH, with its rapid CT scanning, world class facilities and highly knowledgeable staff. From our discussions with Subra, we knew that all this came at a cost. He paid approximately \$500 per month in health insurance and was relatively young and in good health. What did your overweight, diabetic arteriopathy pay we wondered? As we got on with our work we enjoyed Boston life and its sights. The Irish influence in the town was unmistakeable and it was by far the most European in its culture out of any of the American cities I have visited. We completed our article and submitted it for review. The weather improved and we drove to Cape Cod for a weekend, nothing was open. We visited the landing sight of the Pilgrims. It was marked by a commemorative roundabout, (does this sum up America?). The waves crashed over the barriers. The new world must have been daunting at first. After our incredibly enjoyable 5 weeks with Subra in Boston we headed south for a whistle-stop travelling tour:

Miami first, then Guatemala and Honduras. We visited an island called Utila. Lawless and set up by pirates centuries ago, we learnt to SCUBA dive here, obtaining our PADI open water divers certificate in the process. Whilst dining one evening we witnessed a car vs. child hit and run. We quickly acted, trying to clear the scene and give us much immediate care as we could. Putting our recently learned ATLS principles from MGH into practice we used basic techniques to secure the airway and monitored the breathing and circulation as best we could. (RR, HR and Cap Refill). We knew the clock was ticking. Decreased GCS and possible internal bleeds, this girl needed a CT, anaesthetist and neurosurgical consult as quickly as possible. An hour away from the mainland, a helicopter evacuation was imperative. However by this point, word had got around about the accident. We were mobbed by crying relatives and hundreds of children. Some men came and forced us away, picking up the child and scooping her onto a quad bike. The language barrier meant we were unable to get our message across. The child's neck was flopping. We were so frustrated but there was nothing we could do. I have never felt so helpless.

We never knew what happened to the girl.

We reflected on this incident many times on the way home. We still feel we couldn't have done anything differently. This was a horrible experience to end an absolutely incredible 7 weeks. We had had the time of our lives. Elective was over and back to reality. We had grown up and experienced medicine in both the developed and third worlds. We had been pushed out of our comfort zone and made new friends. In a word: Unforgettable.