

**Elective Report: Vanuatu. April – May 2011.**  
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On arrival in Vanuatu, my colleagues and I were expecting to be welcomed into a small hospital, where we could be vital team members. The hospital was small as expected, but there were quite a large number of unanticipated team members there.

Our research of Vanuatu before our arrival, did not stretch so far as to cover the Pacific Partnership; a civic and humanitarian mission, based in Vanuatu throughout our elective period. The mission is largely an undertaking of the US navy, which began back in 2004 as a result of the 2004 tsunami which devastated large areas of south East Asia.

Due to the success of the mission in its infancy, plans were made to build further relationships in the south pacific. The military combined with a number of other organisations, mainly non-governmental to assist their mission. The mission has spread from the Philippines, Bangladesh, Indonesia, West and East Timor down to Vietnam, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and then this year in 2011; Tonga, Vanuatu, Timor Leste and the Federated States of Micronesia.



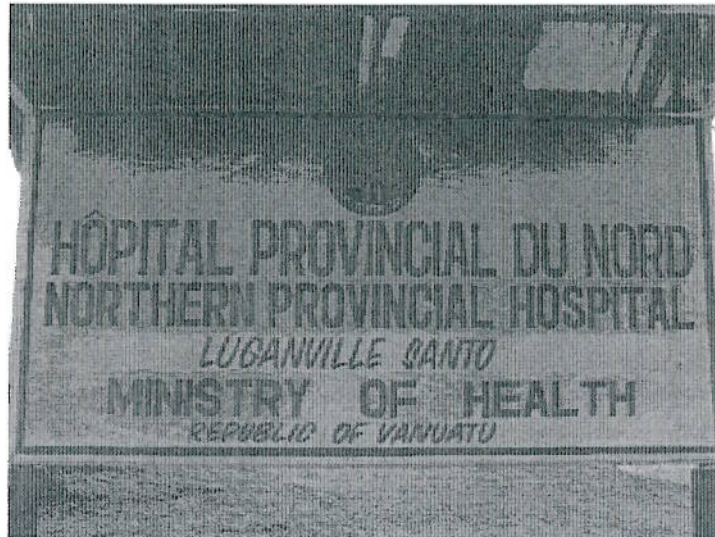
The main aims of the project were to bring medical and engineering staff to the areas to develop sustainability projects including; clean water practices, alternative energy and schooling. The medical side of the pacific partnership project became a major part of our elective time.

We were lucky enough to meet a lot of the officers involved in the initial stages of the project, who paved the way for the big naval ships to arrive with their specialised teams aboard who were ready to infiltrate Vanuatu for a couple of weeks. Through



these officers we were able to participate in clinics in the hospital that the Navy were running.

The Navy set up a number of departments for the weeks they were working in the Northern Provincial Hospital in Luganville, Santo. Included were; general practice, ENT, paediatrics, ophthalmology, dentistry and surgery.



Due to the influx of naval doctors and health care workers, the hospital saw an influx of patients which rose with each passing day. Although the Navy had tried to get the message out before they arrived that there would be additional clinics, they neglected to think about the main method of communication in Vanuatu – word of mouth. Numbers rose from a couple of hundred routine patients on the first day to over a thousand on the last few days. This meant that our time at the hospital was very much guided by the naval plans. Luckily for us, the naval staff were more than happy to accommodate us and to let us join in as much as we wanted.

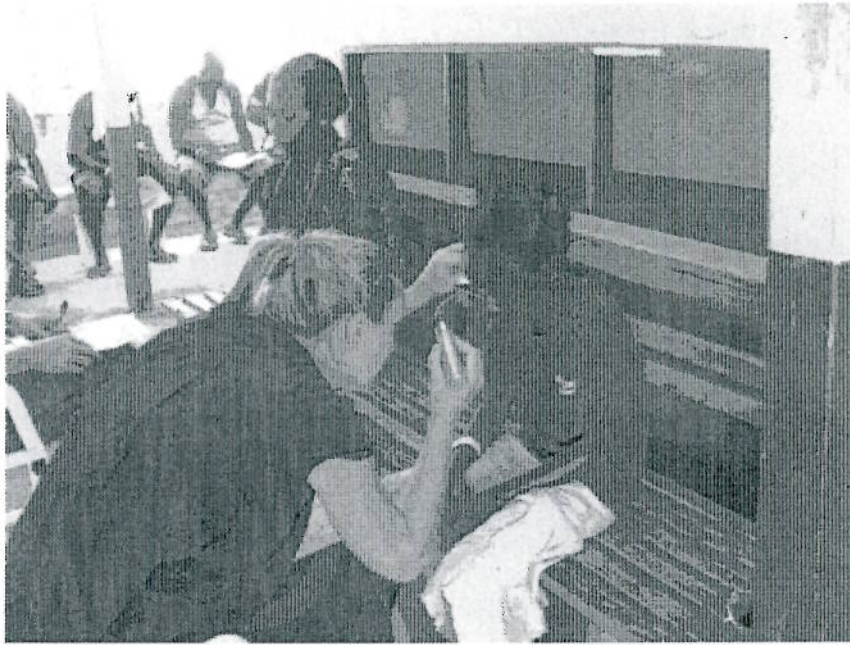
The residents of Vanuatu speak a number of different languages, including bislama, which is widely spoken and generally used in the hospital setting. Seeing as none of the naval staff spoke bislama they employed local people to translate. This was incredibly helpful for us as well. Though we had been given some bislama lessons at the beginning of our time in Luganville, we were still a little slow, and the translators helped hugely in our understanding during consultations.

The inundation of the hospital with patients assisted in exposing us to the common medical problems in Vanuatu. Although we had seen the hospital for a short time with no naval doctors and had been lucky enough to see cases such as malaria, meningitis, severe diabetic changes, and some childhood tropical disease, the influx of patients served to quantify the common conditions.

I spent some time in the eye clinic clerking patients in and then assisting with the fitting of glasses and sunglasses. I had little experience of ophthalmology, and felt lucky to be able to examine so many eyes in a short space of time. The most common problems that I came across here were cataracts, diabetic eye changes and pterygium.



Pterygium were by far the most common condition that I saw during that clinic and the navy came well prepared with sunglasses to combat this problem. Vanuatu is especially hot and dusty, which are two of the major causes of pterygium. The word travelled fast that the navy were handing out free sunglasses, and soon we were inundated with children who had not medical problems feigning pain to sunlight so that they could get some sunglasses. The navy were more than happy to supply the glasses as a preventative to future development of pterygium.



In Vanuatu the local people refer to any foreign doctors as “white man doctor”, regardless of the doctors colour, ethnicity or gender. With so many “white man doctors” about, many of the patients were consulting the naval doctors about chronic medical problems. It appeared that these patients thought that the “white man doctor” may have a solution or medication that they had not already been offered. This was frustrating for the doctors, as nothing more could be done for the patients, but interesting to us to see how locals viewed the foreign doctors and to see how chronic medical conditions were already being treated long term.

We left Vanuatu at a similar time to the navy, so we did not observe the hospital post Pacific Partnership involvement. Hopefully the patients did not continue to stream in, as there would not have been nearly enough staff to deal with them all. From what I saw of the naval involvement, they provided some quick medical fixes, such as reading glasses and pain medication, but I’m unsure of the sustainability aspect of their work. Hopefully by seeing so many patients in such a short time, the pressure was taken off the hospital for the few months after the visit.

The hospital was very well equipped with medical investigatory machines such as CT scanners and radiographic imaging, from the French government, but it appeared that there were not enough members of staff to operate them, or enough funding for small but vital pieces of equipment such as ecg paper. Northern Provincial Hospital is a small but well equipped hospital which appears to need additional funding and staffing to assist in the smooth running of the place.

All in all, my time at Northern Provincial Hospital was extremely interesting and varied and I felt lucky that we had the added bonus of the pacific partnership to draw patients into the hospital and to assist our involvement in clinics and care. When I think of the differences between the UK and Vanuatu, I wonder how a British hospital would receive an influx of US Naval doctors for a few short weeks!