

## Experience of Amazonian Medicine

### Introduction

Iquitos, a population of approximately 250,000 inhabitants, situated in the North of Peru in the heart of the Amazon, an excellent location to attain an unforgettable experience of Tropical Medicine.



The Medical Elective took place at *Hospital Regional de Loreto*, the largest of three hospitals in Iquitos. With a capacity for ninety inpatients, and what seemed like thousands of outpatients, - there was never a dull moment. Being interested in tropical medicine as a specialty, and wanting to make the most of this exotic location, I chose to spend the majority of my time with the Infectious disease team and in Emergency Medicine.

### Comparison of disease distribution

Due to its location and the climate of Peru, Iquitos is at high risk of contracting a host of tropical infections including dengue fever, malaria, TB, HIV and Yellow Fever being the most common. During my time spent in the infectious disease unit a patient presented with symptoms akin to Rabies, however, this although very interesting from a medical perspective was an extremely rare diagnosis and was not proven on my departure.

In comparison to infectious disease distribution on a global scale, I learnt that the prevalent form of Malaria present in Peru- South America is that of *Plasmodium Vivax* whereas, in other developing countries where Malaria is rife such as Africa, -ninety percent of patients present with the more life threatening *Plasmosium Falciparum*. The management in both instances is the same, and of course dependant on the patients ability to access services and pay for medical treatment, as no national funding program is in place.

Similarly with the prevalence of HIV, it is higher in Africa, however, I was able to see patients presenting with CD4 counts lower than 100 and complications such as CMV-retinitis, anal condylomatas, and one unfortunate gentleman- who was initially diagnosed with HIV, then developed TB (a common complication), and as a result of the treatment he received for TB, was then diagnosed with Hepatitis! It was interesting to see the advanced presentations of HIV, which although is increasing in prevalence within the United Kingdom, rarely presents with these features.

### Health provision in Iquitos-Peru

In the little time I spent wondering in and out of Obstetric and Gynecology clinics and in Pediatrics, the other two dominant specialties of the hospital, I understood that although for the majority, even presenting as emergencies, it was a case of pay or die. For certain groups, for example, children, pregnant women and patients requiring antiretroviral's there was a significant quantity of paperwork which if accepted meant the these patients received either free or a reduced rate treatment. Interestingly this paper work had to be endorsed by a ink finger print from the patient, and also meant that the interns were inundated with paperwork- frequently associating their work to that of an administrator!



### Reflection of the placement

I thoroughly enjoyed my experience in Iquitos. Although, not as remote as I had originally imagined, it did not disappoint!. From the friendly homeliness of the doctors family with whom I stayed to the interns and hords of medical students eager to practice their English and of course the mosquitoes- I felt very welcome and was able to learn a lot.

My Spanish got good practice, and I am glad to say has improved. Infact, my communication and acting skills were also well exercised during this trip. The importance and power of communication, in particular nonverbal communication was highlighted during this trip.



The practice of medicine and the role of the medical student or indeed intern is quite different to that i have been accustomed to in the UK: gaining consent to examine patients, explaining procedures, even precautions undertaken for infection control which have been drummed into us from the first day of clinical exposure seem akin here. Patients' are more than willing to have anyone examine them and any procedure carried out on them. This populations unfaltering faith in the Medical profession is humbling and really emphasizes the importance of knowing your subject well. Unlike what is commonly depicted of American Medical practice, medical practice here is not with a view of dodging legal battles from unhappy patients, neither is it as in the UK where more and more patients are becoming well read regarding their conditions and often presenting more well versed than the Doctor. In Iquitos, the patients are not as literate, and even those that are- seem to hold the medical profession in such high regard that even through their pain their respect and manners hold strong. These are the poor, visibly suffering patients for whom, not only as a professional, but as a human your heart goes out to.

I really enjoyed my time in Iquitos, i think the climate, and mosquitos are something that it would take me time to grow accustomed to. However, the incredible food and genuinity of the people is something that i don't think would be easy to find everywhere. Medicine in the Amazon from my point of view is a highly recommendable experience for anyone in or interested in the Medical profession.