

Jenna Kelly

Elective Report – Telo island, Indonesia.

Dr Derek Allen (www.troppodoc.com)

TROPICAL
MEDICINE

Off the south coast of Sumatra is a collection of 101 islands called Pulau Pulau Batu. In total they have approximately 45-60,000 residents. Telo island is one of the more developed islands in this collection, and with a population of ~7000, also one of the most densely populated areas. The island has a circumference of 14 km and is situated very close to the equator. This means the climate is reasonably consistent at 35°C during the day and night, all year round. With the average wage being 30,000 rupiah a day, (10,000 rupiah = 70 pence) which is enough to buy one bottle of local beer, Bintang, there is a relative state of poverty across the island. Local schools are free to attend but medical facilities are not as available.

Dr Derek Allen (aka Troppodoc) is a doctor from New Zealand who has dedicated his life's work to providing medical care to help support the local population's medical needs, as well as many other areas of the world. He also travels to South America, West Africa and Vanuatu every year, spending three months in each area, in order to provide for the poor who would otherwise have little or no medical care. He embarked upon his medical career with the intention of practicing tropical medicine, and specialised in Obstetrics and Gynaecology and Public Health in order to tailor his clinical skills appropriately.

Dr Allen's work is entirely supported by volunteers who also help provide medical supplies to his clinics. His clinic in Telo has been purpose built by the gentleman who owns the land. It consists of a large room with shelves of medicines donated, categorized by each medical specialty, and many boxes and bags stacked in the rafters. When it rains (which it does almost daily in Telo's tropical climate) the room often gets wet and everything has to be arranged strategically to avoid spoiling it with the water.

There are rooms above the clinic where Derek and some volunteers can stay, and consultations are generally carried out on the benches in the yard outside the clinic. Volunteers from all academic backgrounds are welcome, and encouraged, to come and help in the clinics all over the world. There are three hospitals on the island; one Protestant, one government and one Catholic. There are only three other doctors who work in the hospitals, providing facilities such as x-ray, ultrasound and basic blood tests such as FBC and U&Es. In total there are 60 beds across all three hospitals, which costs money to access, so Dr Allen's work provides a vital service for the poor on the islands who cannot afford or access these facilities. Most of the other islands don't have

was the inability to ask open questions, as we were unable to understand their replies. So in general, if we asked a question ("Sakit de mana?" "Is this painful?"), the answer was invariably "yes". This applied to all associated symptoms we asked about too. Due to the language barriers I developed my ability to gesture what I was trying to communicate, and this is something that would be very useful when practicing medicine in a very multicultural areas, like London, or other cities.

There were many hazards I had to consider before arriving in Indonesia. The area has malaria, so I had malaria prevention medication, as well as a mosquito net and repellent spray. I also have to have several travel vaccinations for hepatitis A, typhoid and rabies. I also stocked up on sunscreen and as many medical supplies as I could come by for the clinic. I wrote to all of the local pharmacies and GP surgeries asking if they could donate anything to the clinic before I left.

My experience with Dr Allen has been a complete immersion into tropical medicine. I have learnt an extraordinary amount and developed skills that I didn't even considered that I would (such as dental skills!). I have been completely involved in the medical care provided, and been given more opportunities for independent thinking that I ever have before. It has been extremely beneficial in developing the clinical and personal skills, such as communication. I now feel more confident in my own ability as a medic and I would thoroughly recommend volunteering with Dr Allen to any other medical students.