

**Antigua Elective Report – 22.04.2013 – 24.05.2013**

I completed my elective with ABSAR, Antigua & Barbuda Search and Rescue. ABSAR is a voluntary organization dedicated to saving lives in Antigua and Barbuda and the surrounding waters. It is an officially recognized emergency medical and search & rescue service, where it provides 24-hour coverage 365 days of the year. ABSAR works in close co-operation with the Antiguan Coast Guard, fire and ambulance services. My role mostly involved manning the medic station, a small walk-in clinic situated in Falmouth harbour, and being present on the rescue boats for both Antigua Classics & Antigua Yacht Racing Week.

My pre-set elective objectives were to: -

**Describe the differing attitudes to healthcare, especially in regards to emergency presentations. Compare and contrast this to the UK.**

From my experience there are two very distinct populations that inhabit Antigua; the ex pat yachting community (which is a mixture of all different, although mostly Caucasian, nationalities) and the local Afro Caribbean population. The ex pat community, as you would expect, have a very westernised approach to modern medicine; they appear to be well educated and informed and will often ask for medications by brand name (very American). One American gentleman popped in to the medic station to check that we had antibiotics available, and that they hadn't been produced in China (in light of recent news), not because he needed any – but just in case he might. The locals on the other hand appear to be quite uninformed and possess very little medical knowledge. Type 2 diabetes – both undiagnosed and poorly managed – is common amongst the Afro Caribbean population here. Amputations, presumably from the vascular complications of poorly controlled diabetes, are not uncommon. They don't have access to anywhere near as much of a comprehensive healthcare service as we do in the UK, there are no screening programmes and generally people will only see a doctor if they are really quite unwell. With regards to emergency presentations; what we saw at the medic station was mostly minor injuries, lacerations, burns and infections. Similar to what you would expect to see in any walk in centre next to the sea and a marina really. Local knowledge however proved extremely useful with regards to wildlife / exposure to particular things. Although most could be dealt with over the counter medication it was knowing the presentations and management that proved tricky (including a case of suspected ciguatera!).

**How is healthcare organised and delivered in the Caribbean. How does it differ from the UK?**

Healthcare is largely provided by Mount Saint John Medical Centre which is situated in St Johns, the capital, in the north west of the island. It is a medium sized hospital with 185 beds. Funding is obviously no where near that of an NHS hospital of this size and as a result the standard of care, resources and treatment available, was limited. There is a much larger emphasis on the private sector and wherever possible patients were advised to go private, if they could afford it. Many locals avoid presenting early to avoid a large bill, and hence often present with complications. There are also numerous stand alone doctors that operate privately from small clinics on the island – with a telephone number outside – so effectively available whenever you need them, however no doubt with a hefty call out fee. For sutures you would expect to pay approx. \$500 (£330 GBP), \$200 (£133 GBP) for basic wound management and \$100 (£66 GBP) for solely a consultation. If you can afford to pay then the benefit is you are able to see a doctor quickly – however they are still limited in what they

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can provide – often without access to investigations such as radiographs/CT/MRI – solely relying on clinical judgement to diagnose and treat.

**Learn and describe how private healthcare differs to the NHS.**

Fulfilling this learning objective proved complex as most of what we saw was in a walk-in not for profit environment. Prior to visiting Antigua I had presumed the healthcare system out here would be similar to the American system; solely reliant on insurance company payouts in order to fund access to health care. However, from my experience, this is not strictly the case. There is some form of government funded access to healthcare for all the population, however this is very basic; largely based at the hospital in St Johns – attending usually involves an exceptionally long wait with limited equipment, staff and resources - resulting in most diagnoses being left to clinical judgement and management is often conservative. If able to afford it you were advised to go private/pay an additional fee in order to get access to certain investigations to aid your diagnosis and hence generally provide better treatment. The ABSAR team are often the preferred response team to most medical emergencies as they are better equipped and much more efficient than government services. Whilst en route to a propane gas explosion with ABSAR I asked what the usual course of action was for taking patients who had been burnt to hospital and was told that they would do better if we managed them on our own; dressing the burns with our dressings and providing supportive treatment. This is testament to the fantastic work that Jonathan, and ABSAR, provides out here – all on a voluntary basis.

**Further my knowledge and experience of emergency medicine and prehospital care. Reflect on how this will influence my clinical practice.**

On reflection, I have learnt so very much the past few weeks and exceeded beyond what I thought I would gain from this experience. Being surrounded by, and learning from, paramedics, EMTs, A&E nurses and all sorts of other health care professionals has been extremely beneficial, along with being part of a truly multi disciplinary team. I have had the opportunity to practice numerous key skills such as wound management, dressing burns, examining patients, providing advice and education for common problems, treating minor injuries and prescribing antibiotics and analgesia. I have gained a lot of confidence in seeing, assessing patients and formulating appropriate management plans entirely on my own. I hope this will stand me in good stead for life as a junior doctor come August.

In Sum, I have had the most wonderful experience and am ever so grateful to Jonathan, and the rest of the ABSAR team, for being so welcoming and allowing me the privilege to be part of their team.