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Reflective Essay: Milton Cato Memorial Hospital, St Vincent, Accident and Emergency

I completed my medical elective in the Accident and Emergency (A&E) department at Milton Cato Memorial Hospital in St Vincent. St Vincent was as I expected it to be with a wonderful climate, great people and an abundance of fresh foods. With regards to the hospital I came with no expectations as I had never worked in a developing country. My initial impression of the A&E department was that it appeared to have a good system in managing the volume of patients that arrived at its door every day with a triage nurse deciding if patients needed urgent care.

On the first day of my elective I noted that the doctors face a huge problem when it comes to medical resources. The A&E department at Milton Cato Memorial Hospital is small with six beds, three resuscitation beds and a small seating area. Within this space there is also a bay designated for asthmatics with oxygen ports on the wall. This means that there is only limited space for sick patients to lie down. This is one simple thing that I believe is taken for granted in the UK. When someone is unwell we automatically let them lie down but this may not be possible in St Vincent. There is only one doctor per shift with a large team of nurses. This highlighted the important skill of managing your work load and prioritisation. There is also one X-ray machine within the A&E department but there is no CT scanner or MRI. I feel that this is a real learning point for me as I believe that we may be a little wasteful with the number of scans we do in the UK where perhaps a better clinical history could suffice.

Another problem the doctors of Milton Cato face is that there is shortage of many medications and equipment. For example there is only one size of cannula available within A&E which is the smallest yellow cannula used for children. I feel this is dangerous as it takes a long time to deliver fluids through these cannulas and if someone is dehydrated they may not get the right fluid balance in. This experience makes me feel concerned for the patients but I also believe that nurses are very vigilant in observing patients so would notice any deteriorations.

When a patient arrives to the A&E department they are seen by the triage nurse who reviews the patient's demographics and summarises their presenting complaint. If needed they are then seen by the doctor as soon as they are free depending on the urgency of the patient. This system is very effective and I believe that this is why it is used in most hospitals worldwide. It ensures that urgent patients are seen quickly.

The patients I saw greatly varied as patients included those with the common cold to those with large lacerations to their face or body. I believe that this experience has thought me to work in an efficient manner as well as the prioritisation of patients, making sure those who need urgent care are given it.

During my placement there was an abundance of clinical experience as I was able to clerk, examine, cannulate and treat patients as they came into A&E. This allowed me to observe the whole care pathway within the department and I trust it will only help me in becoming a better foundation doctor.

Whilst on my placement I found it very interesting talking to patients, doctors and nurses about the health views in St Vincent. One of the points raised included the way in which doctors are viewed in St Vincent. I believe that doctors have a lot of power and respect in St Vincent as the patients are very trusting of the doctor's treatment plan and management. When comparing this to medicine in the UK I think that patients are more verbal with opinions on their treatment. I personally feel it is important to involve patients in their care as much as possible as it improves compliance and builds a better doctor patient relationship. I feel that this could be improved with more patient education.

Looking back at my time in A&E allows me to reflect on the negative and positive events. I feel that the negative points revolve around the frustration I felt when we were not able to give the best care to a patient due to a lack of resources. From this experience I hope to take forward a vital skill in using resources we have in the UK more carefully.

A big positive for me was in meeting the team of nurses and doctors in St Vincent. They were all very knowledgeable and always happy to teach me. Also the great variety of patients allowed me to push my knowledge and practical skills to provide the best care.

To conclude I feel I have learnt a great deal from my time at Milton Cato Memorial Hospital. Some of the skills I have learnt include the prioritisation of patients and to ensure a test is necessary before requesting it. I have reinforced my practical skills as I was able to take bloods, cannulate patients and suture. Overall I feel that after my time in St Vincent I will be a more competent doctor.