

Elective Report - Matthew Egan

My elective was spent at Cho Ray Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). Cho Ray hospital is one of the biggest hospitals in Vietnam mainly dealing with referrals of the most severe cases from other hospitals in the south of the country. It is an extremely busy hospital with 700 doctors and 1,800 beds. However, it is normal to have 2 patients per bed and there are on average 2,400 inpatients at any one time.

During my time at Cho Ray Hospital I was attached to the trauma and orthopaedics team. This was very different to my experience in the UK, as 99% of the workload is trauma related, and there is very rarely any routine procedures such as joint replacement. This is due to the high cost of such procedures and the overall low wealth of the country. The Vietnamese government covers 20% of the overall cost of healthcare in Vietnam, with the remaining 80% coming from the individual's own pocket. For this reason, many people will only seek help when there is a great need, and routine orthopaedic procedures are only for the rich.

The main mode of transport in Vietnam is by motorcycle, as there is huge taxation on owning a car. It is common to see 4-5 people on 1 motorbike at a time and protective gear is rarely seen. The roads are extremely busy and rules are not policed with red-light running and driving on pavements seeming completely acceptable. Given this it was not surprising to see that more than 90% of the patients under the care of orthopaedics were from motorcycle accidents. Many of these patients go on to have repeat procedures due to high infection rates caused by poor hygiene. Whilst at Cho Ray I observed a 30 year old patient having a 5th debridement operation due to wound infection after having his foot crushed in a motorcycle accident and subsequently undergoing amputation. The first operation was a below knee amputation, and by the 5th this had extended to the whole femur being removed.

Each theatre is equipped to take 2 patients at any one time, with the patients only being about few feet apart. Hygiene standards are very different to the UK, and the overall quality of the operation poor due to lack of funding. The surgeons often joked that this was "Vietnamese standards" and not "Western standards".

The doctors on the orthopaedic team worked a six day week, one of which was a 24 hour on-call shift followed by 1 day of rest. My regular day started with a morning MDT meeting and handover. This was hard to follow as it was in Vietnamese and I relied on my supervisor to translate, however the presentation slides were all complete in English. This was for the doctors to improve their English skills as with orthopaedics training in Vietnam, an English module is part of the curriculum. Following the meeting, we would see a number of patients on the ward, which was difficult as none spoke English, and the rest of the day would be spent assisting in theatre.

Whilst I was in Cho Ray I was also able to attend a conference with on long shaft hip replacement for patients with fractures after a first replacement.

During my time in Vietnam I gained valuable experience in orthopaedics and was able to improve on certain skills such as suturing. It was good to see how the health system worked in a poorer country than the UK, however the language barrier made certain aspects difficult so what I was able to do on the ward was limited. It was interesting to see the massive differences in income inequality and access to healthcare, and i thoroughly enjoyed my time.