

SSC 5c Assessment: Medical elective report

Describe the pattern of disease/illness of interest in the population of Belize in San Ignacio hospital and discuss this in context of global health.

I spent my medical elective at San Ignacio hospital in Belize. San Ignacio is in western Belize and has a population of 17,000. There was a high prevalence of "western" diseases such as type II diabetes and hypertension; however the severity and presentation of these conditions were a lot worse in Belize. I conducted history and full examination on patients with severe eye, kidney and autonomic complications of diabetes. One patient had a blood pressure of 205/118, which was not being controlled by any medication. I believe this was because the hospital had a lack of funding from the government.

I also spent two weeks within the obstetrics and gynaecology department. Many of the people of Belize are strict Catholics, which oppose the use of artificial contraception, leading to a high prevalence of unprotected sex. Therefore, I saw a large number of patients with sexually transmitted infections and other gynaecological complications such as bacterial vaginosis, candidiasis and urinary tract infections. The leading cause of morbidity in San Ignacio hospital in female patients were complications associated with pregnancy. Many of the deliveries were of caesarean section because there were no options of assisted delivery using a ventouse or forceps; on top of this, many of the women of Belize had naturally small pelvises.

Describe the pattern of health provision in relation to Belize and San Ignacio Hospital and contrast this with other countries, or with the UK.

The healthcare in Belize is provided through a public and private system. From the outside this seems impressive; however there are hidden health care inequalities. Many remote towns in Belize have extremely limited health care and the people are unable to acquire transport to larger hospitals such as San Ignacio hospital. The quality of government led health services are sometimes of a poor quality. The health care in San Ignacio hospital is very different to the health care in the UK. One of the main reasons is the lack of resources the staff have to work with; this is due to lack of funding from the government. There were no MRI or CT scans provided in the hospital. There was an ultrasound machine present; however no one was skilled enough to interpret the images.

The largest section in the hospital is the maternity ward, however the ward is in poor condition. Hospital beds are dirty and old; there is only one dim light for the room. Some patients are left in pain for long periods of time and the staff felt helpless due to the lack of appropriate equipment and investigation options. There are only two delivery beds in the hospital, which again are in poor condition.

Things we in the UK take for granted would be a luxury in San Ignacio hospital. There is no Doctors mess or lounge for the staff to relax in. This leads to high levels of stress for staff who are already overworked as it is.

Health related objective – Describe the health care system in Belize

Even though the government boasts public health services there is a lack of free health care services at a secondary level. This ultimately led to inequalities between the upper and lower class. Patients were allowed to have surgery within the hospital, however were restricted of follow up appointments, chemotherapy or radiotherapy where relevant and most invasive forms of investigation were not free of charge. This meant local people in rural villages had to have diagnosis and management based purely on clinical history and examination as they were unable to afford the appropriate and required investigation. Many of the problems I witnessed within the Belize health care system would have been easily preventable in the UK. It makes me feel grateful for the NHS, which many in the country take for granted.

Provide a reflective assessment of your activities and experiences whilst working at the San Ignacio hospital in Belize

I have had an amazing experience working in the San Ignacio hospital in Belize. I have learnt a lot from the staff with their vast knowledge and clinical experiences. The staff were all extremely friendly, eager to help and teach and hardworking throughout. I learnt a lot about the Mayan culture and the Belize health care system. I explored the beauties of the country Actun Tunichil Muknal caves.

I learnt to adapt through the language barriers; even though the main language was English many of my patients spoke creole and Spanish as well. I gained confidence in my clinical knowledge and improved my clinical skills such as bedside examination. Especially during language barriers I had to really focus on clinical signs to acquire my diagnosis. A few examples of signs I elicited were heart murmurs, organomegaly, jaundice, lung consolidation, bruits, nystagmus and symptoms of stroke.

I improved my practical skills including venopuncture, cannulation, intravenous bag set up, X-ray interpretation, cervical smear testing and assisting in surgical procedures. I would highly recommend any student to conduct their elective at the San Ignacio hospital in Belize. It was an incredibly experience and I hope to use the skills I have acquired there to help me become a better doctor for the future.