

## Elective Report – San Ignacio Community Hospital

### 1. What is it like to work in an environment/hospital with different equipment and patients of a different culture to the UK?

I undertook my elective placement at San Ignacio hospital in Belize. San Ignacio is a rural community hospital. The hospital provides services for a population of 40 000 with the help of only 11 doctors. As it was a rural hospital the number of speciality departments was far less than in the UK. There was an emergency department, one paediatrician, one psychiatrist a mental health nurse and councillor as well as a few district nurses that provided treatment, support and advice regarding long term conditions such as asthma and diabetes. However the main focus and specialty of the hospital was maternity.

At times the hospital was incredibly quiet with only 3-4 patients at other times it was busier but manageable but often the hospital was overcrowded and hectic in a way I have never experienced in the UK. However I never felt that the doctors and nurses were unable to cope with their workload. Having witnessed them at work, I think the main reason for this was their incredible efficiency. I learnt that this efficiency was due to many factors including a limited amount of necessary equipment meaning patients had to be prioritised in a very rigorous and confident manner.

The limited number or even lack of certain equipment meant investigations we take for granted as basic or routine in the UK such as blood tests or imaging were reserved for very ill or high priority patients in San Ignacio. This took a lot of getting used and I realised how much we rely on these tests and investigations in our diagnoses and management plans.

Following on from this another striking difference was just how much the doctors and nurses relied on their clinical knowledge to make a diagnosis or plan. Of course in the UK we too use our knowledge but we have so many resources to confirm or further our differentials.

It was very interesting and thought provoking to work with patients of a different culture. As most of the patients spoke English there was no language barrier. However the interactions were different. I found that on the whole consultations were very doctor centred and patients not only expected this but welcomed it. When I tried to involve patients in the decision making and make the consultations more patient-centred I was sometimes met with confusion. Another thing that struck me was how, for want of a better word, grateful, patients were. Patients were incredibly pleasant and welcoming of us and most were very optimistic when discussing their health and treatment plans.

### 2. Gain an understanding of health promotion, why do patients in Belize present to hospital?

As mentioned above the main speciality in the hospital is maternity. As such the majority of health promotion was directed at pregnant women and new mothers. For example the hospital was covered in posters promoting breast feeding, childhood vaccinations and the back to sleep campaign. On discussion with a senior consultant he explained how successful the breast feeding

promotion has been in encouraging women to breast feed their infants as well as men to accept this. He explained that in the years since the promotion began he and other members of staff have found that young babies and children are healthier than before. When speaking to some of the new mothers I found that they felt more confident and empowered as they felt by breast feeding they were doing something positive and right for their children. Another campaign that the hospital was running was concerning contraception. One particular poster had the different methods of contraception stuck on as a method of encouraging patients to talk about it. However as Belize is a Christian country with a predominantly catholic population this programme will require more time.

Other health promotion campaigns centred on infectious diseases that are prevalent in Belize including HIV and TB. The promotion included educating patients on the spread of TB, how the disease can affect them and those around them as well as the treatment options that are available. With regards to HIV, I found that there is a lot of stigma surrounding such a diagnosis, but the hospital were keen to reduce this by increasing education and providing supportive services. As such they had recently employed an HIV councillor to encourage patients to talk about living and coping with disease in order to improve their management.

Patients in Belize presented to the hospital for a variety of reasons. As it was a maternity hospital many of the patients were pregnant women. As well as this patients presented to the district nurses to discuss their long term conditions. The emergency department also received a number of patients during our elective. This varied from day to day, for example some days there were no patients on others a few with 'minor injuries' and once a child who had experienced a snake bite.

We learnt that patients presented to the emergency department with injuries and conditions such as gun shot wounds, stab wounds, road traffic accident injuries, asthma attacks, cardiac emergencies and PV bleeds.

As is the case in the UK I found that more women than men presented to the hospital and also tended to comply slightly more with the advice and medication that they were given.

### 3. Did I have any preconceptions about Belize and have they changed?

Before arriving in Belize I understood that it is a developing country and that the hospital we would be working in was a rural one. As such I imagined that the hospital would be basic with little equipment. I also thought that perhaps patients would not be as educated on matters of health as patients in this country. However from reading previous students elective reports I was aware that there was an interest in health promotion at the hospital. Having completed the elective I found that the hospital was not as basic as I imagined and that there were a lot of very familiar services that we provide in the UK. As well as this I found that the staff, especially the district nurses took the time to educate patients on their conditions which meant patients had a much clearer understanding of what medication they were taking and why, than I thought they would. Having witnessed the health promotion techniques and discussed these with staff and patients I have a much better understanding of how effective they have been.