

# Elective Report

Western Visayas Hospital, Iloilo, Philippines

Gareth Trevelyan

I had read a great deal on the Philippines before planning this elective but nothing could prepare me physically or mentally for the reality of the conditions there. From the moment I stepped off the plane at Cebu, I realised that the heat and humidity would take some getting used to. As for the conditions in the hospital, well it was a world away from the pictures of wards filled with grinning nurses and doctors we had seen in the online information on the worktheworld website.

The accommodation provided was okay, the 4 of us who knew each other were put in a room with 3 bunk beds and a bathroom attached, no aircon which made the first few nights interesting, and the fighting cockerels bred in the grounds next door enjoyed waking us up at all times throughout the night. Breakfast and dinner were provided for us during the working week, which were all home cooked meals by our more than capable cook, Jerry. There were varying numbers of people in the house depending on new arrivals and departures (24 when we arrived, apparently the house can accommodate up to 34) all from a variety of healthcare roles, most being nursing students. I struggle to see how the hospital would cope with 34 foreign students along with the local students completing their training, and suspect that such a large number would be detrimental to each student's individual experience. Most of the students there were from the UK but a few were from Belgium and the USA.

I was concerned that language would be a problem but as it happens most people there speak English to quite a good level. Most meetings were conducted in English, I wasn't sure if this was for our benefit or standard protocol. Filipino people, as a general rule, are quite staggeringly sweet and kind. Despite having very little themselves they will bend over backwards to make sure that you are catered for in every way, which was wonderful if not a little awkward at times, especially when it came to paying for things!

The hospital (Western Visayas) was a short jeepney (Filipino form of bus) or taxi ride away, costing 10p or £1 respectively. The hospital itself was a large, quite run down building, which had a number of wards in different stages of renovation. I had planned to see mainly Neurology cases during my time at the hospital but it was quite evident that the Neurology workload wasn't great enough to fill all of my days there. There were a few different patients coming in with suspected Neurological issues but the lack of imaging, or the patients inability to pay for investigations, made any proper diagnosis quite difficult. Due to the basic nature of the treatment for neurological patients outpatient clinics consisted mostly of handing out the same prescription to multiple patients which rendered them useless for learning. For this reason I spent a lot of time on general medicine and paediatrics wards seeing a large range of cases. There were some very unusual things to see in the

hospital, plenty of conditions we would read about in textbooks but rarely, if ever, see in the UK, mainly due to the speed at which these conditions would be treated at home. Sadly the chronicity of diseases was also much greater than for the same disease in the UK, the main reason for this being the low income in the Philippines and the inability of patients to pay for, what would be at home, very basic treatment. Once a diagnosis had been made the patient, or relatives, are sent away to buy the medicines or equipment needed before treatment can be initiated. In most situations this is fine (if the family can afford the treatment), however during an emergency this protracted process can add to the stress considerably.

The conditions in the hospital were difficult, horrendously hot and humid, overcrowded and understaffed given the number of patients. Despite this the Doctors and Nurses battled on, doing the absolute best they could for all of the patients. One of the weeks was unusually hot, even for the Philippines, and we caught the locals sneaking of to one of the few air conditioned rooms for a few minutes of relief. The cleaners did a valiant job at attempting to keep the hospital clean, but given the conditions and the old crumbling walls that formed most of the hospital, they were fighting a losing battle. The layout of the hospital and individual wards didn't help the fight against infection, for example the infectious and non infectious parts of the paediatrics ward were separated by a line on the floor, and about 1ft of stagnant air. It came as little surprise that a lot of patients became much more poorly once they had spent some time within the hospital walls.

The week we had living with a tribe was an excellent experience, we had time in the local hospital and healthcare clinic which were more basic than Western Visayas, and could not cater for the more complicated cases, having to send these to the hospital on the main land for specialist care. We had plenty of time to meet the other tribal members, getting an introduction to their culture and way of life.

My time in the Philippines was fascinating, and a real eye opener. In the UK people may make a career out of complaining about the NHS; the waiting times, overcrowding and understaffed wards and the list goes on. But one thing we do not have to worry about is the price of healthcare, and how valuable this actually is. I suspect most people in the UK have no idea how much their treatment costs, and compared with a country like the Philippines just how lucky we are to have cutting edge treatments as and when we need them, and all for free!!