

Elective objectives: Vila Central hospital, April-May 2014.

Describe the prevalence of mental illness in Vanuatu, and discuss how this may differ from the UK.

It is difficult to determine the prevalence of mental illness in Vanuatu, as there are no psychiatric services available beyond detainment of the most severely psychotic. Service provision differs greatly to the UK, with no state funded GP services, with all patients presenting directly to the hospital outpatients for triage. More than 80% of the population live in rural villages, with limited access to western medicine. Among these populations, mental illness would not likely be viewed as a medical problem, and religious leaders of village elders would be consulted first. In research conducted amongst hospital staff, it was found that more than 20% believed withcraft to be the cause of mental illness. It is probable that this figure would be much higher if non-healthcare professionals were surveyed.

Discuss the provision of psychiatric services in Vanuatu, and attitudes towards mental illness.

Psychiatric services in Vanuatu are hugely limited, only providing a place of safety to contain patients who are severely psychotic. The country's only psychiatric ward is a small building at the back of the hospital. It comprises of a single room containing two beds, and a bolted windowless cell. There are no psychiatrists working in the country and no psychiatric drugs stocked in the pharmacy. The newly appointed medical superintendent of the hospital is determined to develop psychiatric services within the hospital. He has been gathering data on the perceived need for mental health services in the country. It was unanimously agreed by all respondents that services were needed, but due to the diverse cultural beliefs, there was a wide range of opinions on how mental health should be managed. It is hoped that when the new hospital opens, that space and funding will be made available to offer psychiatric services. Ideally this would include providing relevant training to local healthcare professionals, who would better understand the cultural issues and local dialects. As the country comprises of 82 inhabited islands, service provision will likely remain a challenge.

Discuss how attitudes towards western medicine differ from the UK.

Outside the capital, western medicine is regarded with great suspicion, and often seen as an expensive last resort. Psychotic symptoms in particular are often attributed to witchcraft resulting from tribal or family disputes. Alternatively, symptoms are blamed on excessive consumption of the local drink Kava. The drink made from a powdered root has been found to contain a mix of analgesic, anesthetic and hallucinogenic agents, so there is possibly some truth in this theory. The majority of the population combines traditional tribal beliefs with Christianity, which has been introduced by visiting missionaries over the past 100

years. As a result, many patient will seek a cure for any ailment through prayer and faith healers.

Reflect upon your ability to adapt to cultural differences and views on healthcare. How has this experience aided your personal and professional development?

It was difficult to adapt to such drastic cultural differences, particularly when cultural beliefs resulted in patients refusing treatment. It was difficult to accept that the only available treatment for severe psychiatric illness was often confinement in a locked room, until the patient had 'burnt out'. My elective has certainly provided great perspective with which to view psychiatric services in the UK, which are so often criticized, but are far advanced to those in Vanuatu.