

Elective Report: Belize 2012

About Belize

In a country with a population of just 300,000 people, Belize is still struggling to provide adequate health care for its people. There are just 12 hospitals in the whole country with complicated procedures and conditions only managed in only one of these. San Ignacio hospital was given a rating of Level 2 out of a possible 3. The complicated conditions are dealt with in Level 3 hospitals.

In Belize, 9% of its total budget is spent on health care. This money is used to pay the entire costs of all doctor visits in the clinic setting (with non-invasive procedures); all obstetric and gynaecological care including contraception and prenatal care; all vaccinations (all standard vaccines given to infants in the U.S. plus BCG for TB). Almost all prescription drug costs are covered however, they only partially subsidise expensive treatments such as those for cancer. The tooth extractions are paid for. Belize also pays the cost of emergency transportation to the national hospital in Belize City for surgical emergencies (but not the return trip), and, in some cases, they reportedly may pay for transportation to Guatemala, Mexico, or even the U.S. for complicated treatments not available in Belize (complicated operations, cancer treatments, etc.).

Things not covered include abortion as it is illegal in Belize and thus not publicly financed. The system does not pay for any elective surgeries. Many services are provided free-of-charge by volunteer doctors visiting from the U.S. or Europe, such as elective surgeries (including cleft palate repair, tubal ligations) and other surgeries, which normally would only partially subsidized by the government. Many studies such as MRIs and nuclear medicine simply are not available in Belize. CT scans are available in Belize City, but the patient must pay out of pocket. Belize has yet to establish a medical school with doctors coming from the countries around Belize.

My Travels

I travelled to San Ignacio hospital however it is better described as a polyclinic. The hospital specialised in obstetrics and gynaecological problems however there were various outpatient clinics running as well as an emergency department.

Mortality for obstetric and gynaecological conditions in Belize compared to the world.

The Coverage of antenatal care (by a doctor, nurse, or midwife) is quite high in Belize with 98.1 per cent of women receiving antenatal care at least once during the pregnancy. Antenatal care was provided mainly by medical doctors (45.9 %) and nurses or midwives (46.6 %). Only 1.9 per cent of the pregnant women did not receive ANC during pregnancy. Three-quarters of all maternal deaths occur during

delivery and the immediate post-partum period. The treatment that women received during birth was significantly better in the San Ignacio area compared to other areas of Belize. Maternal mortality was 53 per 100,000 in Belize compared to 12 per 100,000 in the United Kingdom.

The different protocols for birth and indications for advanced procedures (such as caesarean section) compared to the UK

Caesarean sections are not done as commonly in Belize as they are in the UK. If they are needed, they are flown to Belize City, but they may also be performed in Belmopan Hospital (Both Level 3 hospitals). Caesarean sections are performed very rarely: only if the baby is in transverse lie, if the mother becomes eclamptic, or a few other rare occasions when it is determined that the mother's life is at risk. This is significantly different to the United Kingdom when it can be done for breech or labour that fails to progress as well as by mother's preference.

How did I develop my communication skills

Working in a different country was challenging. I chose Belize due to the fact it is an English speaking country hoping that it would give me the chance to learn new medicine in a completely different environment to the United Kingdom. However, the main language spoken was still Spanish so there was a communication barrier when talking to patients. I quickly learnt to adapt to this barrier by learning common words in Spanish that could quickly help me establish the patient's complaint so I could act quickly if the problem was severe.

Working with the communication barrier was similar to the barrier that exists when working in the royal London hospital when communicating with Bangladeshi patients unable to speak English. Nonetheless, I still learnt essential words in a different language as well as learning how to quickly stream and triage patients.

How did I adapt to a new environment

Working in a non NHS hospital was a completely new experience. The biggest change was how small the hospital was compared to ones in the United Kingdom. The staff number were much less and there was a lack of junior doctors around. I later found out that all training has to be completed outside Belize so all the doctors I worked with had completed their training. It was impressive how one doctor could calmly and seamlessly manage so many patients. Despite the new environment, I quickly learned that most patients were willing for me to observe procedures and talk to me about their health problems. There was incidents when I was alone when there was patients in obvious distress however after initially dealing with the patients request, I quickly found my senior in order to alert him of the situation. This is similar to what may be asked of me as a foundation doctor while on call hence I found that particular experience very useful.

Reflect and learn from both positive and negative experiences.

Overall I found the experience to be a highly positive one. It was sad to see how unfortunate the people in Belize were because of the lack of healthcare and resources available however it was equally as nice to see caring doctors who were there solely for the purpose of helping the people of Belize. I had a few patients who became angry and agitated when they were in distress and I was asked to calm them. Even though I hope not to be in this situation, realistically I will come across patients who are agitated and I was successfully able to calm them down. These skills will prove invaluable in the future.