

ANTE-  
NATAL  
CARE

ELECTIVE REPORT 2012

Experiencing Healthcare in Belize (Antenatal care/Maternal Health)

Hospital:

San Ignacio Community Hospital,  
San Ignacio, Belize.

During this elective, I had the opportunity to visit the Community Hospital in San Ignacio, Belize. It was an educational and life experience to be a part of a healthcare system in a completely new and different cultural environment. Being aware of the increasing cases of maternal mortality in the country as well as high teenage pregnancy rates, I set out to try to gain insight into antenatal care and what, if any, measures have been set in place to reduce these statistics.

In my time there, I realised that overall the healthcare system worked in a very similar manner as in the UK. This could be due to the fact that Belize was a British colony thus practices very similarly to the UK. From the triage system to the basic clerking proforma, everything seemed to mirror what we have been accustomed to through our years at medical school. However, there were still some notable differences.

Speaking specifically for the antenatal clinic, firstly the patient demographics with regards to age were quite alarming. Many of the patients attending the antenatal clinic were young teenage/early 20s mothers. As the clinic went on, we came to know that teenage pregnancy is quite prevalent in Belize. Teenage pregnancy rates have risen up to 20-30%. The reason behind these figures is thought to be a lack of knowledge and limited economic opportunities as well as a general disregarding attitude the youths have towards sexual and reproductive health. What was interesting to note was that at the end of every clerking, the patients were asked about education level, financial background (based on their own and their family members' professions) and their grasp of Spanish and English. These aspects were added onto all clerking sheets as a guide to reflect the patient's education and ability to comprehend the importance of all aspects of antenatal care and reproductive health. The need to ask such questions may seem unusual for us but in Belize it is of high importance as the literacy rate in the country is about 40% thus explaining the need to establish the patients' literacy levels in order to aid with their management.

Furthermore, in each consultation the women would have a check-up of their teeth. This is done on the basis of a research study that hypothesized that dental hygiene is a good indicator of how well a mother can care for her baby. The results of the study showed that poor dental care in mothers was correlated with poor care of their newborn babies. In Belize dental care is not free, it is all run privately, and therefore dental hygiene on the whole is quite poor with statistics showing that in the antenatal clinic alone there are on average 4-5 dental cavities per patient. With these figures, there is concern about the wellbeing of babies and their future care at home.

During my time at the hospital, in addition to the knowledge and facts that I acquired, as described above, I managed to practice my social and

communication skills in new cultural surroundings. With a basic knowledge of Spanish, I managed to speak to patients with relative ease and establish good rapport. This was daunting initially, for both the patients and myself, as I was new to the culture and system, and to them I was a foreign medical student and stranger thus automatically a barrier was created. But with time and patience, I feel I managed to put my basic communication skills to use, in conjunction with my limited Spanish, I maintained good communication and rapport with all the patients that I clerked or spoke to. I feel this experience has given me more confidence for the future when faced with patients from various cultural backgrounds and/or those presenting with a language barrier. This is an experience that I hope to learn from and carry with me through my medical career.

In addition to our time spent at the hospital, we were fortunate enough to have encountered a highly trained and specialised nurse, of British origin, based in Belize for over 30 years. Over her time there she has managed to build up an outpatients clinic for women and children. This is completely unrelated to the hospital and is situated slightly outside the city of San Ignacio. She created this humble establishment, the Good Shepherd Clinic, purely through fundraising and charity work, along with hard work and perseverance. Listening to her stories of struggle and having the opportunity to visit the clinic and seeing first hand what it has become now, this was a truly inspirational moment. She combined her strong religious faith with her kind, generous nature and passion for healthcare to build such a clinic for the local community. Through experience, she now performs basic investigative tests and procedures on women and children, from suturing wounds and minor surgeries, to smear test and blood tests. Through donations and fundraising, she has managed to acquire blood analysers, fluid bags, drips and other such basic but essential equipment to keep on site, allowing her to broaden the type of healthcare she can provide to her patients. Similarly, money for basic medications comes from fundraising/donations as well as the low but optional consultation fees she charges. Here again I noticed the patient demographics to be similar to those of the hospital, young teenage girls coming in for antenatal advice.

Having been exposed such a different healthcare environment has really broadened my horizons and outlook on healthcare. More than just the technical and theoretical aspects of medicine, I have learnt about the emotional and mental strength needed to tackle the healthcare profession. I have seen that with passion and dedication, even with limited resources, patients' lives and medical management can be bettered by just using those resources appropriately.

My time here has been invaluable and truly inspiring. I hope to take this newfound feeling back with me and carry it on to motivate me as I embark on my medical career back in the UK.

Many thanks to all the Doctors and Nurses of San Ignacio Community Hospital and Nurse Juan from the Good Shepherd Clinic.