

Elective Report

Western Regional Hospital, Belmopan

29th April - 31st June 2013

What are the common conditions that affect patients in Belize? How do they compare to the UK?

During my stay at Western Regional Hospital in Belmopan we saw a varied distribution of diseases of which cardiovascular, infectious and tropical diseases were most common. However, road traffic accidents were particularly rife too as there were many trauma operations and patients on the ward.

The tropical diseases included both dengue fever, malaria and more rarely typhoid. The majority of the patients I saw were treated very effectively and the doctors here are used to their presentation. It was a privilege to be able to see a patient present with these conditions as it is very uncommon for anyone in the UK to suffer from one. This is mainly due to our extensive vaccination protocols as well as our differing climate and preventative measures used for when we go abroad.

HIV, AIDS and tuberculosis, are becoming more common in Belize following the increasing incidence from other Central American countries such as Guatemala. Health education strategies are being employed at the hospital to try and reduce the incidence occurring in the population.

Furthermore, much like the UK but more significantly, obesity and its associated problems were extremely common. There was a high incidence of patients I saw with conditions including hypertension, diabetes, angina and myocardial infarction. This could be attributed to the diet that most Belizean people adopt which is high in sugars, fats and carbohydrates. Although I would like to say this differs from the UK, we too have a population that is becoming unhealthier and are suffering from similar problems because of it.

Finally, trauma patients were seen on a daily basis as road traffic accidents occurred frequently in Belize mainly due to the poor road safety. This led to a lot of emergency procedures in both accident and emergency and the operating theatre.

What is the structure of the healthcare system in Belize?

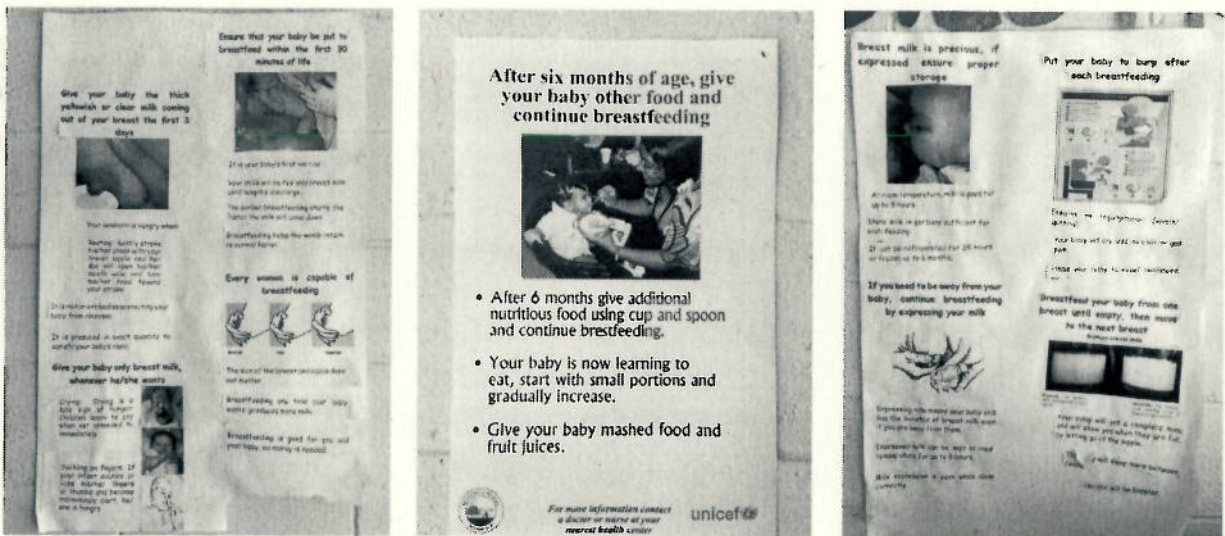
The healthcare system in Belize is similar to the UK. There is a government funded health care which is provided to all Belizean citizens for free or at a small cost. In addition, there is also a private sector which only the wealthy can afford.

Although the hospitals are run by the government, they are still under resourced and depend on the generosity of countries such as the USA. Members of their army medical team were deployed at Western Regional Hospital for the majority of the time I was here to help with the demands. The hospitals also depend on donations, both monetary and equipment and supplies.

The majority of government funding however, is focused on care in Belize City and Belmopan. Many of the other districts in Belize do not have the equipment or resources to treat patients and in which case the patients are transferred accordingly.

How is healthcare promoted in Belize?

In Western Regional Hospital there is a large campaign to encourage mothers to breastfeed. This was visible on our first day as we walked into the hospital as there were a number of posters across the walls with pictures and information regarding the benefits and technique of breastfeeding. According to some of the nurses and administrative staff, this has increasingly improved the compliance of women in the area to breastfeed and has been highly successful. These posters were however, a hospital campaign and during my stay in Belmopan and Belize it was very rare to see any large national campaigns on billboards or leaflets.



In addition, as conditions such as HIV and AIDS are a continuing problem in Belize, I had the opportunity to go along with a group of nurses to a local secondary school. Whilst I was there, the children were educated about the transmission process as well the importance of safe sex and using contraception. This has been an ongoing campaign which hopefully this generation will benefit from.

How does it feel to work in an environment and culture you are not familiar with?

During my time here it was very overwhelming to see patients who were extremely unwell and had waited till the last minute before they had come in to hospital. This is something we are not familiar with in the UK as patients the majority of the time will see their GP or come in even if they are slightly concerned about their health.

It was also a strange experience to be in clinics where Spanish was used considerably in consultations. This was because of the high influx of Cuban doctors working within the hospital. Usually in the UK an interpreter is present so you are able to understand everything that is going on but here I really had to focus on non-verbal communication as well as pick up on some simple Spanish words used.

Furthermore, during my stay the sterilising machine was not currently working in the hospital, so only emergency operations were being performed. This was highly alarming and something that we in a developed country would never be accustomed too or have to deal with. During this period all patients would have to make the 2 hour journey to Belize City for any elective procedures which seemed highly unpractical and not safe. At the same time, as funding was so stringent it was understandable and something that is probably a recurring theme in other under developed countries.