

Priya Bhargava - Elective Report

OBST +

GYNAE

I carried out my elective in Belize and spent 5 weeks at the San Ignacio Hospital. Belize has a population of around 320,000, the birth rate is 26.43 births per 1000, and the mortality rate is 5.87 deaths per 1000. San Ignacio is a small town of about 17,000 in the Cayo region of Belize. San Ignacio Hospital was fairly small and specialised in obstetrics and gynaecology. It consisted of mainly outpatient clinics and an accident and emergency department.

What are the prevalent diseases affecting the people of Belize and how does this differ to the UK?

When we reached San Ignacio Hospital, we were greeted by Dr Rivas and Dr Ramirez who showed us around the hospital and gave us a brief talk about the common conditions that effect the Belizean population.

From just looking around the clinics there were numerous signs and posters raising awareness for HIV so I was not surprised when the Doctor informed us of the high prevalence of HIV in Belize. The numbers of deaths are around 500 per year and in 2009 the rate of HIV/AIDS was 2.3%. Thus there are often many pregnant women who suffer from HIV. Like the UK these women are treated with anti-retroviral medications and then advised to have Caesarean sections. However, as there is an economic strain in Belize compared to the UK not all of the anti-retroviral treatments are available.

In addition were learnt the main infectious diseases are hepatitis A and typhoid. Dengue fever and malaria are also common.

As soon as we stepped out the car and saw the hospital I was struck by the sign outside the emergency department. There was a list of some situations that are considered to be emergencies. The first was 'gun shot wounds', followed later by 'stab wounds' and 'snake bites'. Straight away I knew that the cases presenting in the emergency department were varied from that in the UK.

To learn about the healthcare system in Belize, looking at the antenatal care services offered and how this differs to the UK.

Knowing that Belize was a less developed part of Central America, I had expected health services to be rather poor and very different to the UK. On the contrary I was impressed to learn that healthcare services at San Ignacio Hospital were free and no one is denied treatment on the basis of money similar to the NHS in the UK. Private clinics do operate but only for those who wish to pay for these services again very similar to here. When sitting in on clinics, most consultations lasted 10-15 minutes again comparable to GP consultations here. This did vary according to the case however; on average they were relatively concise. Similarly to the UK there were large waiting times and during clinics

the waiting room was completely packed. Waiting times varied from 2-3 hours and there was a strain on the Doctors to see all the patients. The hospital was small with few Doctors running clinics at a time. Nurses also played a huge role in helping the hospital run smoothly, also carrying out clinics for simple cases. Although healthcare services are similar to the UK in terms of the framework, there is evidently less money available in Belize, hence resources are poorer and high tech equipment is not available. I felt the hospital definitely did the best with the resources that they had.

During my time in Belize I was impressed with the antenatal services provided, with statistics showing 98.1% of women receive antenatal care at least once in their pregnancy. These services were provided mainly by the medical doctors and then midwives and nurses. This is similar to the service ran in the UK.

To learn about the common diseases that present in Belize and how they are managed, as well as obstetric complications.

It was interesting to find out that of maternal deaths, 75% are during delivery and in the immediate post partum period. Statistics show that compared to the UK where maternal mortality is 12 per 100,000, in Belize it is 53 per 100,000.

Eclampsia is an extremely common obstetric complication in Belize and hence hypertension is treated early on in pregnancy with anti-hypertensive medications. These patients are then followed up throughout their pregnancy with their blood pressure being routinely monitored.

I was also interested to learn that complex cases such as deliveries requiring caesarean sections are not carried out in San Ignacio hospital as they do not have the specialist equipment. In these cases patients are taken to more specialist tertiary hospitals where they can be accommodated such as Belize City and Belmopan Hospital 15 miles away.

As mentioned earlier snake bites are common in this area, and therefore anti-venom was readily available at the hospital.

To enhance my communication skills when dealing with language barriers and how to adapt to new environments.

Before I had arrived to Belize I was slightly nervous about what to expect. From what I had heard Belize was a dangerous place with gun crime at a high. On the contrary when arriving at San Ignacio, south of Belize City I was so impressed by the beautiful town.

On arriving at the hospital itself I did not find communication to be much of an issue as the national language is English hence, when clerking patients I did not encounter a language barrier. At first building rapport did take a bit of time as it was obvious I was

from a different country however, after a few consultations I had got used to the situation and then found it much easier to build rapport and have the patients trust me.

The environment was different and I was not used to the less equipped rooms and fewer junior doctors being around. However, again once given time to settle I could easily navigate around and use the equipment available efficiently. In addition, if I had any queries, the senior doctors were happy to help me so I didn't feel alone. I think this has definitely helped me prepare for becoming a foundation doctor.

I found the all members of the MDT to be very kind and helpful. Furthermore, I noticed the patients were extremely grateful for Doctors and medical students and I really felt appreciated and as if I was making a difference.