

Elective Report – Tom Chance

Milton Cato Hospital, St Vincent.

Saint Vincent is a volcanic Caribbean island, with about 130,000 inhabitants. Milton Cato is the largest hospital on the island. I was attached to an Obstetrics and Gynaecology team for 3 weeks. This initially came as a surprise to me, as I had been told that I would be in accident and emergency. It has been a while since I had done any O&G, so initially I was a bit rusty. I did plenty of reading during my time off to refresh some of my knowledge around the topic.

Most of my time in the hospital was based on the wards, doing rounds and assisting/shadowing some of the junior doctors there. Everyone was very friendly and happy to teach. I also spent time in theatres, and in clinics. O&G is a good specialty in that regard, as it is a good mixture of medicine and surgery.

I managed to see a wide array of conditions on the wards and in theatre, and I was told about conditions which are more prevalent in the Caribbean demographic. I also saw differences in some of the techniques used during surgery. For example, all of the caesarean sections that are performed at Milton Cato hospital, are under general anaesthetic, unlike in England. There did not seem to be a specific reason as to why when I asked, but I think this highlights a way that medicine varies around the world, sometimes for an unclear reason. Otherwise, my impression of theatre was very good. It seemed very similar to my experiences in England. All instruments were sterile and surgeons followed the same infection control protocols that I have been taught.

On the wards however, wound infections were very common, especially post-operatively with some of the patients I saw. The team all wear white coats, and hand washing is not advertised as clearly as it is in England. There were also no alcohol gels by beds, or even on the wards at all, there was a sink at the end of the room. The pharmacy would run out of very common drugs quite frequently, which meant doctors were cautious when prescribing antibiotics as there was a limited supply. There was one day when the pharmacy completely ran out of clexane. This presented a unique challenge for me as there was different (and limited) equipment for taking blood etc. I enjoyed learning new methods and techniques that the doctors showed me.

Saint Vincent is a poor country, and although healthcare is not officially free, one of the registrars told me it is essentially is. Each patient is encouraged to give a donation for each night they stay, their investigations, and their medications. They are told to report to an office on their way out, and this rarely happens. Citizens pay little taxes, of which almost nothing goes towards healthcare, which is part of the reason why the hospital is not particularly well developed. There is a partnership with an American medical school (Trinity), and the consultants do a lot of private clinics. One junior doctor said that the nurses are paid the same as the doctors in St Vincent.

Despite not knowing a huge amount of O&G, I did feel confident in my history taking and clinical skills. It did feel very similar to some of the placements I have had in England, with regards to the competencies expected of me. There was no bleep system in Milton Cato that I came across, everything was done by phoning or visiting departments and individuals. I did not see a single computer in the hospital other than

the secretary's office, which meant that there were lots and lots of handwritten forms for the junior doctors to complete. All this means that communication between and amongst teams was very important. The consultants were very particular on this, and I tried to follow their protocols whenever it was needed.

I enjoyed my elective in Saint Vincent and would recommend the island to other medical students, and holidaymakers. It is a beautiful island with lots of things to do, and all the people are very friendly and accommodating. It is a small island, but during our time there we were never bored or lacked things to do. The demographic provided unique healthcare challenges that I had not encountered, and enjoyed seeing and hearing of these cases and stories. I think the hospital is well practiced with having overseas medical students and doctors, as we were well introduced to the area, and we encountered a lot of others in the same situation as ourselves. This meant we all went out together on some evenings and we had a good sense of camaraderie. Seeing practiced medicine in a very different setting from that I am used to was a valuable experience, and I have gained from the elective.