

I completed a six week elective in San Ignacio Community Hospital, San Ignacio, Belize in Central America. I went with my two classmates as we had always wanted to see this part of the world and it was a good opportunity to go together. We chose Belize as it is officially an English speaking country and although I speak Spanish, we didn't want there to be a language barrier in the hospital. Central America was also a good entry point to South America where we wanted to travel afterwards. We initially had looked into going with 'Medics Away' but were advised not to by friends and instead we arranged our elective privately which worked out well for us and we had an overall good experience.

We wanted to do a mixture of specialities as we all had different interests and also wanted a broad overview in preparation for finals. We had chosen to do 2 weeks in each; Accident and Emergency, Obstetrics and Gynaecology and Paediatrics. In reality when we got there the system was quite lax and you could switch about from day to day depending on what was going on. The hospital itself was quite small for being the only one available for the whole town. It had limited staff and was really more like a polyclinic. There were very few admissions as most patients who needed complex care were transferred to the bigger hospitals in neighbouring cities. Therefore we spent most of our time in clinics which went on all day and were very like general practice. This was a good way to see a variety of patients including older people, children and pregnant women in what was effectively a primary care setting. We also got to see low risk births in the delivery suite and simple fractures and wounds that were taken care of in A&E. The staff were all very welcoming and keen to teach us. We spent most of our time shadowing doctors however there were nurses and midwives available too. Not all of the staff spoke English and some consultations were solely in Spanish. This was great practice for me so I tended to spend more time with these doctors while my friends went with the English speaking staff. There was plenty of opportunity to talk to and examine patients as well as perform basic skills such as taking blood pressures, measuring vital signs and measuring fetal heart rates. The patient turnover in the clinic was high and so consultations were short. You had to use your initiative and be assertive in asking to do things.

I found that the elective experience met my expectations in what I have learned and seen. It allowed me to see and appreciate another healthcare system and compare it to the one that I am used to. This helps to develop your attitude towards patients and diagnosing. We knew that Belize was a developing country and we wanted to experience what the hospital would be like. Care is basic, but adequate and resources are limited. More emphasis is put on judging situations clinically and less emphasis on the investigations. For this reason it was a good way to brush up on your clinical skills and think outside the box. The role of the doctor is also different in Belize as he/she tends to have more of a paternalistic approach. The cultural differences were difficult to get used to

in the beginning as well the lack of resources and treatments that are offered to patients. Patients generally aren't well educated and have poor health beliefs. As healthcare wasn't a free service for everyone, I saw some diseases at their worst stages. There is little to no sex education and contraception isn't widely used. Therefore the pregnancy rate is high with a high proportion of teenage mothers and a high proportion of sexually transmitted infection as well as HIV. This was more than I had expected it to be. For this reason we were careful in the skills that we were asked to perform.

Thankfully we did not encounter any unforeseen difficulties. We were aware of the cultural attitudes towards women as friends had told us and for this reason I would advise females to travel in groups. Generally it was safe however you had to be cautious. For example walking anywhere alone or going out at night would have been dangerous. We stuck together and because we were staying with a family we felt safe. We also had received all our vaccinations as recommended including some that weren't such as rabies and yellow fever. Although Belize is low risk for Malaria we also took anti-malaria tablets while we were there. I overall had a great experience not only seeing the healthcare in Central America but seeing Central America as a tourist and learning about its interesting history. There are many archaeological ruins in Belize as well as activities to do such as cave tubing, canoeing and hiking. San Ignacio itself is a small town but there are tourists passing through all the time so you get to meet new people and socialise in the restaurants and bars in the main street. It was cheap to live there for six weeks and also cheap to travel elsewhere via bus. We used our weekends to travel to local Caribbean islands and into neighbouring countries such as Mexico and Guatemala. I enjoyed my time in Belize very much and would recommend the company we used 'Nefry's Retreat' and their 'Belize Medical Elective Package'. The experience has definitely changed my attitude towards practice and will hopefully influence me in the future. It has been good preparation for final exams. As well as this it helps to boost your confidence in making you feel more independent and giving you a sense of achievement. I feel glad to have experienced it and getting to practice my Spanish was a bonus.