

Elective Reflection

Saint Lucia, Rebecca Cox, 5th year student Cardiff University.

I recently undertook my elective at Victoria Hospital on the island of Saint Lucia. The hospital is the main public hospital on the island, serving 65,000 people and located in the capital, Castries. On arrival I was based in the renal and general medicine unit, which I was keen to be involved in. I divided my time between ward rounds and clinics. The renal unit is located in a small building at the back of the hospital, within which the unit clinics and dialysis take place. Inpatients with renal disease are treated by the general medicine teams, who I was fortunate enough to spend time with as well.

The doctors who staff the renal unit communicate in Spanish, as many of the doctors are from Cuba, whereas the rest of the hospital communicates in English. In contrast the patients speak Creole, a local language which is a combination of English and French. This combination of languages can make communication difficult between members of staff and patients. Until recently the dialysis unit contained one single dialysis machine, compared to over 200 machines in individual centres in the UK I have been to. Apart from private hospitals on the island this was the only public dialysis machine, making access to the service extremely difficult. As a result the unit was very busy, with dialysis starting at 3 or 4am and continuing until late at night. Dedicated nurses and doctors run the dialysis unit. There is limited funding for treatment at Victoria Hospital, the government only provides \$800 EC per patient, after which they must provide their own funding. Compared to the UK where patients do not pay for their healthcare for each admission. Many of the islands inhabitants are poor, as the country is considered a developing nation. Each dialysis session costs \$500, making it impossible for the island's people to pay for private dialysis themselves. Additionally with limited government funding many people cannot afford dialysis at all. Recently a new unit has been opened at St Jude's Hospital further south that has eased the strain, although patients must travel across the whole island to use this.

On the wards there is a large variety of renal diseases. Many patients present late as they cannot afford to see a doctor. Some of the patients I saw on the ward rounds included patients with ureteric colic, ureteric obstruction, renal failure, pyelonephritis, and fistula-related complications. The most common causes of end stage renal failure are diabetes and hypertension- similar to the UK. One of the patients with ureteric colic developed pyelonephritis after ureteric obstruction. The patient had bought inappropriate antibiotics from a local pharmacy that had worsened his condition. Eventually the patient was admitted to intensive care unit at the hospital. This is a common problem seen at the hospital as many patients will self treat with unsuitable medications obtained from local pharmacies to avoid paying expensive hospital fees. In comparison to the UK where only limited drugs are available over the counter.

There is a vast difference between the care of renal patients in Saint Lucia and the UK. The availability and access to treatment in the UK is much better. Patients with end stage renal failure are able to have regular dialysis and consultant care. In Saint Lucia even having simple blood tests can be unaffordable for many, let alone continuous dialysis. As an in

patient each investigation must be paid for, meaning that regular blood tests and more advanced investigations are not performed. Even if the patient can afford investigations the service is not always available. For example the ABG analyser would frequently break and remain unfixed for many days. Awareness of renal disease is low, with many people being undiagnosed until the later stages of disease. In addition renal disease is often not monitored or reviewed once diagnosed. The complications of end stage renal failure are also more common as the disease may not be recognised or treated in earlier stages

I felt my experience at Victoria hospital showed the vast difference between care in the NHS and the public hospitals of Saint Lucia. Lack of funding and access to care in a developing nation have a huge impact on healthcare. I learnt about the difficulties involved in providing care and maintaining quality of care on a small budget. From my time spent at the hospital I now fully appreciate how valuable the NHS and the service it provides is.