

Elective Report – The Surgery // Mulago hospital

My elective had been set up with a maverick British doctor in Kampala, Uganda. I had been expecting to go and work on several projects that this doctor oversaw including one for street children and one for sick and abandoned children. Upon arrival it became clear that I was expected to spend most of my time at the main institution, a primary care clinic mainly for Kampala's expat community. The first week was interesting, and I saw cases that would never be managed at a primary care level in UK, e.g. pulmonary schistosomiasis, a loculated para-pneumonic effusion occupying the entire hemi thorax of a 5 year old, a patient with paroxysmal AF who had smuggled fleccanide and wanted us to give it to him 7 days after his symptoms began. However during this first week I found myself increasingly frustrated that the projects I had thought I was going to be working on were merely there to be visited. It was not shaping up to be the elective that I had visited Africa for. I therefore visited a variety of other places including Retrak (the street kids project), Alive (a centre providing comprehensive care for HIV patients) and Mulago (the main hospital in Kampala). It was here in the emergency department that I found my feet.

Mulago was the "shining example" of what Africa could achieve post-independence, a huge tertiary referral centre providing (partly) free care to all. It is the hospital featured in *Last King of Scotland*, where a newly qualified James McAvoy finds himself working after abandoning his intended placement with a British doctor. I however found it to be a shining example of how not to run a hospital and it really made me appreciate the systems that we take for granted in our NHS. I spent the remaining four weeks of my elective working in the medical admissions ward in the casualty department. I saw a huge variety of cases across multiple specialties. I was clerking patients (often with the help of translators as many of the patients didn't speak English), initiating managements plans and filling out the relevant paperwork. I would have a doctor to supervise me but the quality of this supervision depended massively on the doctors on duty. My time also coincided with a series of riots and political violence and so the casualty department was often overwhelmed. On one such occasion me and one other student were left alone for three hours in the emergency medicine ward. Out of my depth and with no one to translate all I could do was go through the ABC motions. Fortunately no one dies that morning.

I gained a lot of experience in actually seeing the effect of simple resuscitation measures. I learnt to be systematic by a rather overwhelming exposure to many patients, sick enough to rack up impressive early warning scores, with advanced pathologies, with no one else seeming to be particularly bothered about them. I had to cannulate a man with a fever, and a systolic blood pressure of 70, when the person supposedly in charge was trying to put in a single blue one. I had to seriously battle with the nurses to get oxygen for someone with clear heart failure and sats of 72. However I was often uneasy with the management of patients, often uncomfortable with the minimal information given to them and always appalled by the lack of any type of system to ensure that they received the treatments advised, that they were monitored regularly and that they were followed up. There were so many simple measures that could be instituted that would save many lives. The solutions however are not simply applied because of the lack of coordination throughout the entire system.

I thoroughly recommend an elective placement in Mulago, but it is not a good place for those who want to save Africa, nor those easily affected by avoidable suffering. It has been tough but I have learnt a lot from it and I think that I will be more prepared for that first night on call as an F1,

content in the knowledge that calling for help is an option. If you want any of my contacts do get in touch alex.keeley@gmail.com.