

My Elective Report: Karuna Chellen – Blantyre, Malawi, 2016

During the 2nd year of my Physiotherapy degree I had to think about choosing electives. Since starting at Nottingham I had always wanted to do an elective abroad, particularly in rural health. After doing research and looking at previous electives from my alumni, Malawi seemed the perfect fit. Previous students had great contacts with Physiotherapists there and after dozens and dozens of emails I had finally planned to do my elective in Beit Cure Hospital, in Blantyre, Malawi. The bursary followed; after submitting my application and attending an interview, I received a helpful sum towards trip costs.

What enticed me to Beit Cure was its focus on children's orthopaedic conditions, the majority of which I had not encountered. With Malawi being a country with a high case of Cerebral Palsy, I knew the experience would be extremely enlightening. My aims were to learn and understand the challenges faced by therapists and other MDT's, as well as adapting the techniques of a therapist with the limited resources of a rural setting.

My first week was a whirlwind. I was greeted by Innocent and Precious, hopped in the back of the CURE ambulance, and made my way to the hospital. I lived with a photographer, two medics, and two orthopaedic doctors, who ending up making my trip incredible and unforgettable. On the first day I attended Chapel, the staff choir sang beautiful songs and then the Director introduced us to the team. There was little induction as I went straight into ward round, a full (roughly 35) bedded ward full of kids – slightly overwhelming.



During my elective I helped run a weekly clubfoot clinic, which was eventful. Malawi has one of the highest cases of clubfoot in the world, some idiopathic and some related to CP, Spinal Bifida and other neurological conditions. A team of around 5 and I would see roughly 30 kiddies in one morning, consulting, plastering and all sorts, it was extremely hectic but wonderful to see kids coming back with corrected clubfoot with conservative management.

After my first week, the forthcoming weeks became a routine, I felt like I had been there for months. Mondays were morning clinics, as a team we saw a lot of cerebral palsy kids, therapy consisted of versatile exercises to help them with areas like sitting balance and walking, whilst trying to keep the kids engaged.

Tuesdays and Wednesdays were orthopaedic clinics, Thursday's were clubfoot clinic and the afternoons and Friday's were wards and desperately trying to discharge all patients safely before the weekend. The days were busy, but when every child greets you with a smile and their family members hug you to give thanks to helping their children, it is more than bearable. Thankfully I had the most wonderful team who taught me how to manage my time, to provide therapy for kids with specialist conditions like Cerebral Palsy, and to speak Chichewa. At times I felt as though I wasn't experienced enough to be treating specialist conditions. Due to lack of staff and funding, I knew if I didn't see them, they wouldn't be seen, so I felt useful in allowing them to have some sort of therapy.



During the last 2 weeks I was fortunate to help with a hydrocephalus clinic, which I found challenging learning of the amount of failed shunts resulting in worsening hydrocephalus, and the lack of understanding by mothers in attending hospital appointment to aid this (through no fault of their own). I came to admire the parents of the kids at Beit Cure. It was extremely challenging to have a child with special needs in a society that doesn't yet fully understand details of conditions and how to care for them, and with the lack of funds to fully support and care for that child. Yet every parent I met at Beit Cure showed incredible devotion to meet his or her kid's needs. I also attended an elective orthopaedic surgery, where a kind consultant talked through the entire operation.

I learnt and experienced more than I ever thought I would. I learnt about and encountered conditions like Cerebral Palsy, Spinal Bifida, Hydrocephalus, Osteomyelitis and club foot. I learnt the hardships that professionals who work in therapy face. As they are not directly acutely medical, there was at times a lack of funding and emphasis on therapy which would be frustrating and exhausting. I was so grateful to work within a multidisciplinary team, I learnt so much from the nurses, doctors, rehab technicians and students who I met along the way.

I learnt that Malawian food is yummy, especially the hot crispy deep fried cakes called 'Mundases'. I climbed mountains, visited tea plantations, bought a lot of chitenges (popular patterned clothes that all women wore), made life long friends and foremostly had an unforgettable experience.

My only regret is that I didn't stay for longer, I urge all students planning their elective to think about choosing one in rural health, to experience a culture whilst looking at their profession from a different perspective is rewarding and personally, completely worthwhile.

