

Old school in the New Hebrides: the Vanuatu experience



Resource limitations don't slow the medical staff – or the babies – at Vila Central Hospital.

In August 2012, I travelled to Vanuatu for a week with funding provided by the ANZCA Overseas Aid Trainee scholarship under the supervision of Dr Matthew Howes, a staff specialist from the Mater Mothers' Hospital in Brisbane.

We were based at the Vila Central Hospital in Port Vila, the capital city on the island of Efate, providing relief anaesthetic services during the Pacific Society of Anaesthetists conference in Fiji.

Vanuatu is a south Pacific nation comprising some 80 islands approximately 2400 kilometres east of Cairns. The islands are tropical and located in a region of active tectonic plate movement known as the "Pacific ring of fire". Earthquakes and volcanic activity are common and we experienced a quake measuring 5.1 on the Richter scale during our stay.

Vanuatu is country of contrasts; luxury cruisers moor in the harbour while a few streets away families live in very humble circumstances. Despite the poverty, it has been dubbed "the happiest country on earth" and the national people (known as Ni-Vanuatu or Ni-Van) greet you with a happy "hello" and a bright smile.

Due to geographical and linguistic separation, the islands display an amazing diversity of culture. Residents speak more than 100 distinct languages and there are many dialects. The official languages are French, English and Bislama (or Vanuatu pidgin English). Most hospital staff spoke English, but for many patients Bislama was the common tongue. It was interesting to discover that the term "anaesthetist" is not only a mouthful in English but also in Bislama. While the surgeon is known as the "katem man" (the cutting man), there are several variations for "anaesthetist". For example, I could be called "dokta blong makem man i silip gud" (the doctor who makes you have a good sleep) or this could be expanded to "dokta we i stikim man o i givim gas blong makem bodi i ded blong dokta i save katem" (loosely translated as "the doctor who either sticks you [for example, spinal] or gives you gas so that look dead in order for you to be operated on").

The hospital at Port Vila was once located on a small island in the harbour, a five-minute boat ride from the mainland. Today the island is home to the Iririki resort, however, if you look carefully you can see what remains of the former hospital. More than 30 years ago it was decided to move the hospital to the mainland, which by all accounts was

a good idea. The current Vila Central Hospital comprises several single-storey buildings with separate wings for medical, surgical, obstetric and paediatric patients. The hospital is in a particularly poor area with many slum dwellings nearby. There are always groups of people milling around and kids kick a football on the open grassed area near the entrance.

Immediately it is evident that this is like no hospital I have worked in before. The two operating theatres are old and patched up. Everything from the beds, lights, diathermy, drapes and gowns appear to be from a bygone era and bring back fond childhood memories of watching M*A*S*H. There is a distinct lack of order and the meticulous sterility we are accustomed to in western hospitals. The anaesthetic machines seem more cluttered. The ampoules are hard to read and even harder to break; a file beside the anaesthetic machine is used for this purpose. There are no colour-coded drug stickers and multi-dosing of drugs is common to avoid wasting scarce resources. There are sharps everywhere, no needleless injection systems. Sharps bins are makeshift containers, such as used water bottles or cardboard boxes. Many "single use" items are recycled, including Hudson masks and oxygen tubing. The ward charts, drug charts and anaesthetic records are bland and there