

Differences in Dignity: Reflections on a Surgical Placement in a Vietnamese Public Hospital.

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Keywords

Medical Elective | Healthcare Perceptions | Surgical Etiquette | Plastic Surgery |

Abbreviations

MDT Multi-Disciplinary Team
NHS National Health Service
UK United Kingdom

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Abstract: This piece is a short reflection on the elective placement of a fourth-year medical student in Vietnam. It aims to evaluate the differences she perceived in healthcare systems between Vietnam and England. The article draws on her experiences over a four-week period and comments on how these have influenced her future practice. Overall, the text hopes to shed light on the important benefits which elective placements add to a medical student's journey towards becoming a proficient and empathetic clinician.

Reflection on my Elective

The Elective

I rotated through various surgical departments in a public hospital in Hanoi. I spent two weeks in the orthopaedic surgery department and two weeks in the plastic surgery department. Many of the operations I saw were fundamentally like ones I had seen before in England; however, theatre etiquette was vastly different.

Elective Objectives

The main objectives for my elective were:

- To gain a greater understanding of the differences in healthcare provisions between England and

- Vietnam
- To evaluate the cultural differences between healthcare practices in Vietnam and England.
 - To gain experience in the operating theatre and learn more about various surgeries within the orthopaedic and plastic departments.

Reflection

A key difference I noticed was the global variation in staff attitudes towards patient dignity. On the operating table, the patients were often left unnecessarily exposed to multiple Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) members, long before (or after) they needed to be uncovered. This was particularly distressing when the patient was under general anaesthesia, being both unaware and unable to respond. This pattern repeated throughout my placement, including observing a surgeon take a group selfie midway through a total hip replacement, which had the patient's open leg in it. A 2014 paper about patient satisfaction within Vietnamese public hospitals recommended that staff needed more training on medical ethics and communication with patients (Nguyen and Nguyen, 2014). When I visited in 2025, I felt that this was still an unsolved issue.

Watching these actions made me uneasy, as I felt that the patient's dignity wasn't being properly maintained, especially when patients were in a particularly vulnerable state. This made me want to speak up, but I

faced challenges due to language barriers and the fact that I was essentially a guest in their hospital. Overall, I felt that this behaviour went against the medical pillar of benevolence, as it may have caused the patients embarrassment and led to reduced trust in doctors. Healthcare in Vietnam generally has more of a paternalistic attitude (Tri *et al.*, 2022), which may also mean that patients feel unable to advocate for themselves in situations like this.

My experience in Vietnam made me realise how much I had previously taken the NHS's patient dignity standards for granted. This has made me re-evaluate the importance of patient-centred care within my everyday practice. Taking basic measures, such as keeping patients covered until just before surgical cleaning, or re-covering a patient's genitalia after inserting a catheter, can make such a difference to patients' feeling comfortable and safe. I will keep this in mind in my future work and try to be an advocate for patient dignity, including speaking up when I see others not doing the same. Additionally, I would like to learn more about cultural influences on medical ethics.

Conclusion

Overall, I feel I have met my objectives, having gained better insight into surgical specialities and healthcare differences between the two countries. I am grateful to the Linder Foundation for their bursary towards my costs. My elective has been an experience that will affect the way I practice medicine

for the rest of my life.

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