

Barriers to Timely Healthcare Access in Paediatric Presentation: A Reflection on an Elective in Rwanda.

AUTHOR:

Visitation Lesterpearson

Fourth Year Student Doctor, University of Sheffield, UK.

Keywords

Global Health | Medical Elective | Paediatrics | Rwanda

Abbreviations

No abbreviations have been used in this article.

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Address correspondence to: Visitation Lesterpearson, School of Medicine and Population Health, The Medical School, University of Sheffield, Beech Hill Road, S10 2RX

E-mail: vlesterpearson1@sheffield.ac.uk

Editors: Dr Neil Chapman, School of Medicine and Population Health, The Medical School, University of Sheffield, Beech Hill Road, S10 2RX.

AJPP@kent.ac.uk

<https://journals.kent.ac.uk/index.php/ajpp/index>

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Abstract: This article reflects on an elective placement undertaken by a fourth-year student doctor in Rwanda. It gives an insight into the influence of socio-cultural health beliefs and traditional healing practices on the provision of healthcare services and patterns of paediatric presentation in a resource-limited setting. The article aims to highlight the benefits of overseas elective for personal and professional development.

Reflection on my Elective

The Elective

I undertook a two-month clinical elective on the paediatric emergency and neonatology wards in a main hospital in Rwanda. Alongside clinical placement, I participated in community health screening, including follow-up of premature infants discharged into the surrounding community.

Elective Objectives

The main objectives for my elective were:

- To develop clinical assessment skills for acutely unwell children in a resource-limited paediatric emergency setting.
- To understand socio-cultural and

health-system factors contributing to delayed presentation of paediatric illness.

- To reflect on how differing health beliefs shape families' care-seeking behaviour and my own clinical practice.

Reflection

On the paediatric emergency ward, I met a young girl presenting with progressive limb weakness, an inability to walk or sit, faecal and urinary incontinence, and recent memory loss. Her symptoms had worsened over six months, with new-onset seizures one week before admission. I was struck that this was her first hospital presentation.

My initial impression was one of neglect. However, examination revealed scars across her body from repeated visits to traditional healers, where treatment involved cutting the skin with a heated blade. The presence of these scars showed that health-seeking behaviour had, in fact, occurred, and that my own framework for judging the family's care had been too narrow for this context.

The Three Delays model (Thaddeus and Maine, 1994) helped me understand this family's approach to care. I want to reflect specifically on Delay 1: delay in deciding to seek care, illustrated here by the family's initial recourse to traditional healing. This choice is shaped by socio-cultural beliefs and prior experience and is closely aligned with the family's own understanding of illness. Traditional healers in Rwanda are valued for

offering person-centred, engaged care that can address needs conventional services do not always meet (Tan *et al.*, 2021). This reflects a broader pattern: caregivers' initial choice of treatment and their perception of illness severity are recognised factors influencing delay in seeking formal paediatric healthcare (Hunde *et al.*, 2024). I was struck by the cutting treatment, which felt harmful and unfamiliar, but I recognise that this reaction was shaped by my own cultural background and medical training. Rather than viewing the family's actions as irrational, I have come to view them with curiosity; within a regional context, they are seen as being a trusted and acceptable practice.

Going forward, I will routinely ask about traditional remedies as a structured part of history-taking in progressive presentations, rather than relying on incidental examination findings. I will also use such consultations to counsel families on red-flag features warranting earlier formal review, including brief safety-netting around the infection risks associated with cutting practices (Kubwimana *et al.*, 2025), without dismissing their initial choices or alienating them from future care.

Conclusion

This elective deepened my understanding of how socio-cultural beliefs shape families' health-seeking behaviour in resource-limited settings and challenged me to broaden my own framework for judging paediatric care. My clinical skills, cultural humility, and confidence have all developed considerably, and I would strongly

recommend this elective to future students.

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