

Community Health Initiatives in St Vincent and the Grenadines: Medical Elective Report.

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Keywords

Community | Health Awareness | Medical Elective

Abbreviations

St. - Saint

UK - United Kingdom

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Abstract: This article was written following a period of elective study by a final year medical student in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. It gives an insight into the influence of community efforts on the provision of healthcare services and patterns of disease in the general population. The article aims to highlight the benefits of conducting a period of elective study, in terms of both personal and professional development.

Reflection on my Elective

The Elective

The elective was based in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, attending public and private clinics, whilst helping local medical students run community health fairs. The events were free to attend, providing basic observations, diabetes monitoring, and clinical examination. My role was to 'fact-check' the local students' examinations and give basic health advice.

Elective Objectives

The main objectives for my elective were:

- Compare healthcare systems similar and different to the NHS, and how they serve their population
- Work in an unfamiliar clinical environment, applying my

- clinical skills and improving my adaptability in new situations
- Understand the presentations of diseases endemic to each country and their management and impact on the patients

Reflection

In St. Vincent, type 2 diabetes and hypertension have a high prevalence, 10.3% (WHO Technical Document, 2016) and 39% (WHO Technical document, 2023) respectively, compared to a 7.9% (Diabetes - Data | Fingertips | Department of Health and Social Care, n.d.) prevalence of type 2 diabetes in the UK and 15.2% (Fingertips | Department of Health and Social Care, n.d.) for hypertension. Therefore, the need to provide accessible health education relating to these illnesses was important.

From my experience in the public and private clinics, many patients stopped taking medications when they believed they were well, or if they felt as though they were taking too many medications (similarly to the UK). Consequently, at the health fair, we found patients' blood glucose and blood pressure to be incredibly high. I found myself having to communicate the real risks associated with poor glucose and blood pressure control to patients, as simply stating that their numbers were high had little bearing on their view of the medication. I realised health information has to be quantifiable to the patient; the consequences of a major health event on their daily life were far more impactful than health metrics. These communication skills are equally

applicable in the UK, especially in primary care.

The patient demographic at the health fair was generally younger than I saw in private and public clinics. Young people were actively seeking to improve their health, for example, one patient realised they could not exercise for any length of time and wanted support and guidance on how to improve their health and fitness. I found this really encouraging, indeed Zhang *et al.*, (2024) suggested health awareness (extent of an individual's knowledge and concern about their health status and related behaviours) positively predicted healthy lifestyle development, self-esteem and social support. In discussion with the local medical students, making such changes may be difficult because in their view, many young people do not seek medical attention, for risk of embarrassment or appointment expenses. Young people should never feel embarrassed seeking medical help - I will ensure I actively listen and understand their concerns, encouraging engagement with health services.

Community health efforts can really benefit these young people; through improving health accessibility and awareness, they are more likely to have healthy habits into adulthood, reducing their risk of long-term, life-changing health problems. It would be interesting to see if similar community health fairs could have a comparable demographic and impact in the UK. Improving youth health awareness is something I will aim to continue in my practice, using

patient contact to promote healthy behaviours and therefore reduce the risk of lifestyle-related diseases.

Conclusion

My elective was such a valuable placement. The combination of public, private and community experiences strengthened my insight into healthcare on the islands, and the associated challenges, including cost, health accessibility and perception of disease. I have a greater appreciation of the NHS; free, accessible healthcare through one organisation has a substantial impact on a patients' understanding and management of their health.

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