

GIFT Report 2012- Papua New Guinea

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Introduction

I spent 9 weeks in four areas of Papua New Guinea as the major part of my medical elective. My major aim was to experience practicing medicine in a developing country with considerably disparate cultural beliefs and to develop some insight into the challenges faced when delivering Western health care in such a setting.

Due to the nature of the country my hosts varied from ex-patriots, to ex-patriots who had married nationals, to first hand experience of village life in some of the remotest villages in Papua New Guinea (PNG). All provided their own insight into life in PNG. As my award from the GIFT trust was for a home stay with nationals I have focused my report on these experiences. However, my experiences working with numerous health professionals and patients in three unique locations in PNG were also central to my time in the country and I feel that the most significant people, cases and events should also be included in this report. As such I have not provided a step by step account of my days nor in detailed descriptions of each and every home stay.

My greatest challenge was acknowledging titles common in Tok Pisin such as "white man", "bikpela" and "masta" which belied far too directly the past and present afflictions foreigners have and continue to lay upon this country. My greatest pleasure was outstripping these titles, sitting on the dusty floor and giving nationals the respect they too rarely receive from other ex-patriots residing in the country.

Brief summary trip

In the interest of my own security and also as part of a quest to reach rural PNG I ended up staying with numerous families during my time in PNG. Friends are made incredibly quickly in PNG and facebook has reached many areas allowing me to easily remain in contact with them. In particular I am now the English representative of the newly founded PNG International Health Partnership which primarily helps to organize medical electives to PNG and hopefully in the future exchanges with PNG medical students. Unfortunately, some of the most memorable friendships I made were in remote regions with no access to Internet or international phones. Furthermore, if a letter ever reached them it would be a miracle-postal systems and addresses being both non-existent. My intention had been to visit a country I would probably never go to again. I now know that I did

not meet this objective as I will surely return to this remarkable land.

I began in Port Moresby General Hospital in Port Moresby staying with David Williams and his family in a high security compound before flying to Hoskins airport in West New Britain and staying with the caretakers for Mahonia Na Dari Marine research centre. During my time there I visited the Talasea people and learnt a little of their language- Bula. I then stayed in East New Britain with Nick Lyons and his extended family including his wife from Buka and many of his Tolai friends. I had some memorable experiences including fishing on one of the hand made outrigger canoes known as an Oawga in the Tolai language of Kuanuaa. I then set off for the remote mining town of Tabubil. On my way I spent a few days with some Monks of the Passionist fathers community in Moresby whilst I waited for my connecting flight. In a country which is so dramatically and openly Christian but still struggles with extreme violence and corruption it was fascinating to meet people who are forced to preach the word of God behind barbed wire fences and could all tell stories of being attacked themselves. I was particularly impressed with some of the nuns who would walk through some of the roughest districts in town to persuade the kids to come to their free classes to learn to read and write. I then went to Tabubil in the Star Mountain region of Western Province. I spent my time staying in various remote villages which straddle the border between Western and Sanduan province in PNG and Irian Jaya/West Papua to the west. For me this was the highlight of the trip with the most memorable cultural experiences. Ranging from reporting post-mortem findings at a local funeral to meeting a man who described his experiences when the village made first contact with white men less than 70 years ago.

All my home stays were remarkable for their incredible hospitality and generosity. I concentrate my report on the events both in and out of the home which I feel are most culturally interesting. In almost all instances I was staying either with the people I worked with or the patients I saw. This gave a very rich insight into the lives of the people I lived with. Unfortunately, the report is already long as it is and I simply cannot write about all the experiences I had. In the same vein I must also apologise if the report resembles a disjointed collection of stories where many of the characters are poorly introduced. I hope that in my presentation to the Rotary Club I will be able to elaborate on my report and discuss certain issues in more detail.

concerning PNG are rarely useful and perhaps never correct. Nevertheless, I must say that I found PNG fascinating and therefore have found it impossible not to draw some conclusions from my experiences.

In an attempt to place my experiences in context I have already been in contact with the British museum, visited the PNG collection in Musee de Branly in Paris and continue to email various friends I made in the country. If one ever wanted proof that the present can only be understood when one has knowledge of the past then PNG would provide that evidence. When I set eyes on the Façade in the Musee de Branly which had come from the very village I had stayed in (Tifalmin) I experienced a vast range of emotions. Strangely pleased that I could say that I had met the people who had carved this item but also guilty that this object of their current lives was now an item of voyeurism for the wealthy West. An accompanying temporary exhibition in the museum entitled "The savage through Western history" consolidated all my thoughts. In short my experiences have allowed me to see through the detached wonder one has for phenomena such as "sorcery", "invisible men" and "extreme violence" and somehow relate to the human behind these strange beliefs as I would any other. Concepts became reality- an incredibly important transition which only experience can provide.

I would like to sincerely thank The Reginald Gilbert International Youth Friendship Trust for their extremely generous award which provided considerable financial assistance for my travel. I hope that my report demonstrates that my experiences were both memorable and valuable. It is entirely appropriate that my travel can be successfully surmised by Reg Gilbert *"These intensive, self-revealing and in some cases, life changing experiences promote(d) a greater knowledge and appreciation of another culture, whilst bringing about a more realistic understanding of one's (my) own culture"*.