

2014 Tonga Trip Report/Blog

September 20, 2014

Tonga – Non-Communicable Diseases in the Developing World

By Susanne Kitching and William Cranwell

Each June, TeamMED sends a group of medical students from various year levels to the island of Vava'u in Tonga. This year, the group included William Cranwell, Marcus Yip, Johnson Ja (Year IV), Madeleine Palamara, Lucy Taylor (Year III) and Susanne Kitching (Year II). The aims of the trip include assisting medical officers at the Prince Wellington Ngu Hospital, conducting free health checks in the community, promoting healthy living, and developing an appreciation for non-communicable diseases (NCD) in the developing world.

With the kind support of *Insulin for Life*, *Roche Accu-Chek*, the Wong family, the Alfred Hospital and the Monash medical student community, the team raised more than \$4,000 for the purchase of medical equipment to assist the hospital and conduct the health checks. Without this support, the trip would not have been the great success that it was!

The hospital experience was certainly eye opening, with students involved in diabetic, wound, and antenatal clinics, surgical ward rounds and immunisation school visits. The medical officers were very welcoming and were keen to teach students how they cope with a lack of resources. For example, without an ultrasound machine, the doctors are forced to rely on clinical examination and the results of very basic blood tests, which have only been possible in the last twelve months. The ingenuity of the medical officers was on full display during our second day at the hospital, when a baby was born at 29 weeks gestation. The severely preterm infant was treated in an isolated room under a heater with a makeshift “helmet” delivering oxygen.

One of the highlights of the trip was accompanying the doctors and nurses on their weekly outreach clinics. The medical staff visit each village every three months for review. These clinics and home visits, performed in the area on the same day, are the only contact for many patients on the island who are unable to visit the hospital in the main town. Patients with existing illnesses, including diabetes and hypertension, were monitored and their medications altered if required. Given that NCD screening was one of our main aims, the opportunity to help run this clinic so early in the trip allowed us to understand the hospital referral process and gain an appreciation for any cultural factors. Ultimately, this made our own screening clinics much more efficient and effective for the community.

The Tongan people were extremely keen to participate in the free public health checks that we offered in the Vava'u community. We conducted our clinics with the help of the NCD nurses in order to communicate in the native language and book high-risk patients into the following week's clinic at the hospital. A number of patients were likely to have been suffering undiagnosed hypertension and diabetes, and were referred to the doctors at the hospital accordingly. Discovering these patients early hopefully reduces their likelihood of developing complications of hypertension and diabetes. During the screening, we encouraged people with a large waist circumference and high BMI to reduce their weight, increase their daily exercise, and present to the hospital for regular health checks. There is a huge cultural barrier to encouraging health promotion and preventative medicine, and this is certainly

something that is not easily fixed. Our educational brochures, written in Tongan with information about diabetes and lifestyle, proved to be an immensely helpful and popular tool.

If you are interested in becoming involved with TeamMED and want to learn more about our global health initiatives, please visit www.teammed.org or like our Facebook page – “Team MED”.

June 23, 2014

At the halfway point!

The team has been very, very busy on Vava'u! We are not sure where to start! The doctors and nurses at the hospital have been so welcoming and are excellent teachers. We have been included in diabetes and hypertension outpatient clinics, medical and surgical ward rounds, surgery and minor procedures, and antenatal assessments. We have also had the chance to accompany the doctors for an outreach clinic at a village on the other side of the island, and immunisation programs at the local primary schools! The doctors are fantastic and would be more than receptive to having more students throughout the year. If interested, please get in touch with TeamMED for any details!

The diabetes screening checks are also in full swing!! We have not screened over 300 patients in the community using the Accu-Chek lancets and glucometers donated by TeamMED. We have found some truly astonishing readings! The highlight of the diabetes screening clinics was definitely the pandemonium at the Saturday morning market, where we screened for hypertension and diabetes. Our efforts were made all the more difficult by the amazing church choir at the stall next door! It was truly a Global Health Experience! The people of Tonga and Vava'u are wonderful, lovely people who are truly appreciative of our work – to the point that some of our fruit and vegetables are discounted!

Of course, we cannot travel to this paradise without enjoying the flora and fauna! On Sunday – a day when Tonga literally shuts down – the team hired a van and toured around the whole island. Some of the beaches we found were truly amazing! It was almost as if no one had ever set foot on any of them! The van only got bogged once, which made for a big push by Marcus and Lucy. One final highlight was Johnson, Will and Marcus receiving traditional Tongan haircuts at the local barber shop! Truly a hair-raising experience!

June 18, 2014

Off to a running start in Vava'u

Day 3:

The team is in Tonga! The trip got off to a flying start... except for the bags, which were left in New Zealand! We arrived in Tongatapu and spent the first day exploring the capital city's hospital and the nearby markets. The chicken and rice was delicious!! The hospital in Tongatapu is basic, but services the whole west side of the island (70,000 people).

We boarded the light-plane to the island paradise of Vava'u, where we will be conducting our diabetes clinics and working at the hospital for the next two weeks. The views from the plane were beautiful and the one-hour flight went so quickly that we barely noticed turning back to Tongatapu due to inclement weather on the island. What had first seemed like a trip into paradise, had turned into a scenic flight over our destination.

We spent Sunday, a religious day in which Tonga closes down, at a beautiful beach house with a private beach, enjoying the sun and preparing for the upcoming two weeks. The guesthouse operator was very hospitable and was very keen to teach us all about Tongan culture!

We finally arrived in Vava'u on Monday afternoon and settled into our picturesque accommodation by the bay. Today we began our diabetes screening clinic and have tested over 50 patients, with very high random glucose results found!

The plan for this week includes assisting in the hospital and the GP clinic, and establishing our diabetes clinic in the town to begin screening patients. We also have the chance to visit a local village through an outreach program to screen for diabetes and assist with the doctor's work. And of course, Vava'u has amazing fishing, diving, snorkelling and beaches to enjoy over the weekend!!