

Team Med Trip Report: Tonga 2018

Executive Summary:

The Tongan initiative is very much a “choose-your-own-adventure” trip that allows flexibility in creating your own itinerary and goals, but with an established, strong working relationship with the local hospital and diabetes clinic you can rest easy knowing that things will work out just fine. Your days will include plenty of free time, which allows a good balance of relaxing, enjoying the natural beauty, and getting to meet the locals and take part in whatever happens to be going on.

Tonga is one of the most obese nations in the world and education on lifestyle factors (healthy eating, smoking, exercise, etc.) is lacking in relation to diabetes, obesity, hypertension, and heart disease. This is where Team Med comes in. The main objective of our presence is to assist the local health authorities in identifying, screening, and educating people about lifestyle choices and minimizing the impact of metabolic syndromes. This is approached from several avenues—fundraising and gathering supplies to provide material aid to the underfunded hospital and clinic, running our own screening clinic in the town centre, and getting involved with community groups or other initiatives that are already running in Tonga. Most mornings, we had 20-30 people come through and 50+ on a Saturday for a total of approximately 200 people getting their BP, BSLs, height, and weight checked over our 10-day stay (which was shorter than planned due to cancelled flights). Many had never been tested and unfortunately, few were normotensive, considered a healthy weight, and had appropriate glucose levels for a random test. Despite an eagerness to get tested and a warm welcome, Western medicine is not very influential. We felt our best efforts to educate people about the importance of lifestyle modification and adherence to medications may not have been getting through to many.

Julian Burnside, the famous Australian barrister known for his work with refugees, tells a story of a young girl who discovers hundreds of starfish washed up on a beach. She is distraught that nobody is helping and is determined to get them back into the ocean. Somebody states aloofly, “You’ll never be able to save them all!”. She places one back in the water and replies, “Maybe not, but I’ve already saved one.” There are many barriers and social determinants that impede the Tongan people from achieving perfect health, and there is no denying that we will be able to correct those through a yearly trip with a handful of medical students. You are not going to save the world on this trip, but will you be able to make a substantial difference in a few lives? We like to think we did.

Beyond the student-run clinic, the very modest hospital is a good experience to appreciate truly rural/remote/underserviced medicine and gain lessons that you can take with you throughout the rest of your medical career. There are many sick people and there are very few resources in the way of staff, medications, and diagnostic equipment. There are 3-4 doctors and a handful of nurses that run the medical, surgical, maternity, paediatric wards, as well as the outpatient NCD clinic and cover emergency. There are no clot-busting drugs as they are too expensive, which means the treatment of a suspected heart attack (because they cannot do troponins or CK urgently) is aspirin and nitrates. Strokes are managed symptomatically. You might be imagining a place full of despair with all this morbidity, but the overall energy is a positive one. The medical staff are laughing and joking with the patients on ward rounds, the large and permanently open windows let in the abundant natural light, fresh ocean breeze, and allow patients to take in views of the pristine blue waters. A patient who is receiving palliative care for leukaemia is laughing at the plight of a young woman with acute gastroenteritis. In this case, laughter truly may be the best medicine for both of them (if we ignore the major infection risks of placing an infective patient across from an immunocompromised one).

Medicine aside—Tonga is a great place to recuperate and relax from the Melbourne bustle. There are very few tourists and the locals are happy to include you in their feasts, kava ceremonies, and youth outreach programs. We toured around the island, learned the process of making coconut oil from climbing the trees to the celebratory pig roast at the end, watched the sunrise over the ocean, went snorkelling on beautiful reefs full of fish, went out dancing on a Friday night, and made some great friends along the way.

Special thanks to (in no particular order):

Rotary Donations in Kind, Gippsland School of Rural Health, Insulin for Life, Waverley Private Hospital, Melbourne University Health Initiative [MUHI], Private donations from friends, family, and during fundraising events, 2018 Trip Coordinators Tiffany Tie and Susanne Kutching, and of course, all of the great people we met while over there.

2019 Trip Contacts/Coordinators:

Owen: oxie2@student.monash.edu

Chris: cswev1@student.monash.edu

Brian: bmcp0001@student.monash.edu