

FEATURES: ELECTIVE REPORT

Floating Doctors, Bocas del Toro, Panama

Natalie Bell

The Floating Doctors is a non-governmental organisation which was set up and initiated by a man from America, who recognised the health adversities experienced by the Ngäbe population in Panama. The definition of “floating doctor” is a doctor who provides temporary medical coverage when normal services are otherwise unavailable.¹ The idea of the Floating Doctors is to deploy medical teams to remote underserved areas, where ongoing health services and community projects can occur.

During my time with the Floating Doctors I was able to play a role in providing medical care to four different remote communities. The isolation of these villages meant that their medical care was subpar. The people living in the villages experienced an absence of sanitation, electricity, clean water, and other infrastructure. This has led to poverty as well as poor health literacy. Getting to these communities was a challenge in itself: it could involve up to eight hours of boating, often busing, and up to a three-hour trek. We had to take all the equipment, paperwork/notes, and medications with us which was difficult, especially in the extreme heat. The main health issues I observed were worms, other parasitic infections such as scabies, fungal infections, machete wounds and other infected wounds, malnutrition, dehydration, sexually transmitted infections including HIV, pregnancy, and poor prenatal health. Each day with the Floating Doctors held new challenges and experiences, and I never knew what I was going to see next. This was a huge contrast to the first part of my elective in Miami.



Our boat ride to Salt Creek, Bocas Del Toro, Panama

I could not decide what I wanted to use my elective for and contemplated many ideas. I spoke with some older students and decided to look for an elective which would challenge my current experiences as a medical student. I wanted to make a positive contribution and use

the skills I had acquired over the past five years of medical school to help other people and do something useful. During my elective research I stumbled across an organisation called the Floating Doctors whose mission is “to reduce the present and future burden of disease in the developing world, and to promote improvements in health care delivery worldwide”.² They run a volunteer programme in Bocas del Toro, Panama, Central America which looked like a once in a lifetime opportunity in a very unique healthcare setting.

To be honest, this was a bit outside my comfort zone and I questioned whether I could embark on the challenge. I am not much of an outdoors person and reading about the Floating Doctors initiative online informed me it involves a lot of activities such as sleeping in hammocks, lack of access to showers, and living off very basic foods in extremely remote villages. It appeared safe and the reviews were nothing but positive. After much contemplation I decided I would like to use my elective for something I would not ordinarily or easily experience, as well as assist in some way and help an under-resourced population.

I applied for the Floating Doctors online through their website, which was an extremely easy process. It involved few administrative questions as well as a short paragraph on why you wanted to volunteer. There was also a compulsory \$100 USD donation which was counted as part of your total fee and showed commitment. The total cost associated with the programme includes accommodation, meals, and

travel expenses around the Bocas Del Toro province which was \$550 USD per week. I decided to do the programme for four weeks as I felt this would allow me to gain a good understanding of medical accessibility and care in the remote Ngäbe (indigenous Panamanian) populations. The money you pay to participate in the programme goes directly towards the resources and costs of running the clinics. The programme is mostly funded by volunteers’ fees which was reassuring for me as I knew my money was being put to good use.



Arriving at Río Caña, Bocas Del Toro, Panama

I was accepted within a week and was sent the Floating Doctors handbook which contained extremely useful information about the programme itself and also travel recommendations to get to Bocas Del Toro. They were very efficient with communication and if I had any questions they were quick to respond. I spoke with my friend from the Christchurch campus of Otago Medical School who expressed interest as well and we decided to do our placement at the same time. We flew into San Jose in Costa Rica and got a public bus down the east coast of Costa Rica, across the border to Panama, and down to Almirante which was very easy and cheap (about \$10 NZD). From Almirante we got a boat across to Bocas del Toro and met the other volunteers. The Floating Doctors organises a boat every Sunday from Bocas town to base camp which takes about half an hour.



Patient I saw with external fixation rod.

The Floating Doctors base is located on an island called Isla Colon which is part of the Bocas del Toro archipelago in the north eastern region of Panama. The only inhabitants on the island of Isla Colon are the Floating Doctors volunteers and staff, usually around 50 people. The area consists of many small islands, so most villages are only accessible by boat. A standard week on the Floating Doctors would consist of either a day clinic week or a multi-day clinic week. My friend and I did four multi-day clinic weeks during our stay in the area. This

consisted of getting up on Monday and travelling to our destination; Tuesday to Thursday are clinic days where a clinic would be set up within the village - usually in a Rancho or whatever was available. We would return to base camp on Thursday afternoon and Friday was used for setting up the pelican packs for the next week's clinic. Clinic days would run from 8am until all the families had been seen by a doctor. Sometimes this could be until after dark and we could be working right up until we went to bed. Meals were black beans and rice for lunch and dinner, and fried bread with condensed milk for breakfast. During these multi-day clinics we slept in hammocks tied between trees or whatever we could find. It was a really unique experience and I have never done anything like it. I was truly out of my comfort zone which is why I think I came out feeling like I had really changed my views on health care in general. Being in a situation where you are not always comfortable is challenging but rewarding and I think this is why I took so much from the experience.

The Floating Doctors was an incredible experience and I would strongly recommend it to any future medical students looking for something to do with their electives. You are exposed to many specialties, which was very beneficial for me as I am still unsure about what I want to specialise in. In saying that, the programme would still be beneficial even if you have already decided on a career as it outlined many other health issues among remote populations. It was very hands on, and I got a lot of clinical time as well as independence. Working in the remote Ngäbe populations of Bocas Del Toro gave me a more global perspective of healthcare and a greater appreciation of poverty as well as the developing world, especially in relation to medicine. It allowed me to experience different cultures and learn how to work effectively with limited resources.

We all worked with translators which made communication quite difficult between us as health care workers and the patients. I don't know how much information would actually get through or if we were understanding their main issues or concerns. On my first day I saw an 18 year-old girl who had had a tumour in her radius removed by the local hospital. She presented with an external fixation rod, which had been in place for four months. She had been told she needed a bone transplant, but we were unsure on where or how. The communication was extremely difficult, as neither her nor her mother knew her diagnosis or the type of surgery she had. In this case we took down all the information we could as well as the hospital name and the surgeon who operated on her. Our assessment of her was inconclusive but the plan was to get in contact with the surgeon and find out what was going on. We arranged a follow up with her after a month time and gave her mother money to catch a boat to the clinic so we could see them again. Another interesting experience I had was on a day when I was working with a general surgeon from Cuba, who was also a volunteer. We saw a man who came in with multiple abdominal complaints, which were likely to be attributed to parasitic worms. At the end of the consultation he mentioned a skin lesion on his cheek. The surgeon looked at me and said, "We are going to cut it out." It was very interesting to see the working conditions of the surgeons and the tools they use given the limited resources.

Relating back to the healthcare system in New Zealand, I was able to recognise similarities in health disparities experienced by both the Ngäbe people and Māori despite them being very different indigenous populations. I realised that the skills we learnt in Māori health during medical school were interchangeable and relevant when I was working with Ngäbe people. These skills allowed me to create and enhance the doctor-patient relationship.

Having only been exposed to health care in New Zealand, I now realise how sheltered I have been. I have never appreciated the Millennium Development Goals of health care as much as I did in Panama. Being in New Zealand and learning about these concepts and health strategies makes it difficult to appreciate their importance when you have not seen the problems for yourself. The contrast to the first part of my elective was notable. I am very happy with my elective and the different aspects of medicine I got to experience. I would highly rec-

commend the Floating Doctors to anyone who is unsure about what they want to do for their elective.

Their website is here for more information: <https://floatingdoctors.com/>

References

1. Floating Doctors. Who we are [Internet]. 2017. Available from: <https://floatingdoctors.com/about-us-who-we-are/>
2. Floating Doctors. Our mission [Internet]. 2017. Available from: <https://floatingdoctors.com/about-us-who-we-are/our-mission/>

Author's blurb

> Natalie is a First-Year House Officer currently working in Auckland City. She is an Otago University graduate and has a special interest in women's health and health inequities.

Acknowledgments

Consent was gained for the photographs in this report

Correspondence

Dr Natalie Bell: nat.bell95@gmail.com



Connor walking to clinic at Salt Creek, Bocas Del Toro, Panama