With the help of the expeditions fund I was able to organise a trip to the West Bank, to live with a Palestinian family in Bethlehem for one month. I arranged this placement because I have an interest in how health services differ between countries, and what influences these systems. As a medical student I am striving to gain experience in the field of global health, as I enjoy studying this subject and plan to incorporate this interest into my future career. Volunteering with a variety of organisations in Bethlehem has given me a good understanding of the culture, and of the services available. I have outlined some of my experiences below.

**Hospitals**

I volunteered in a private hospital, the local governmental hospital, and a polyclinic. This informed me about the range of healthcare available. Bethlehem Arab Society for Rehabilitation (BASR) is a private hospital that began as a rehabilitation centre but has expanded to become a general private hospital, with a large rehabilitation department attached. I was initially surprised by the resources available here, but moving to different organisations I found that they were not all so well equipped. For example, BASR is one of only two locations in the whole of the West Bank that can perform endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography (ERCP) investigations. On the other end of the spectrum, the polyclinic radiology department still uses film for x-rays, as they do not have access to newer machines, which work with computers.

I worked in a variety of departments across the centres, including an intensive care unit (ICU), endoscopy, paediatric, general practice and emergency departments. I observed how a lack of resources affects hygiene; gloves and sheets were used for multiple patients until they were visibly dirty. The governmental hospital was a good example of how funding affects what health resources are available. The ground floor houses the emergency department, which is in dire need of new facilities; equipment is scarce and the space is crowded. However, on the sixth floor the new haematology and oncology paediatrics ward is equipped...
with the latest machinery. This was built two years ago by the Palestine Children’s Relief Fund (PCRF) and is the first and only department of its kind in the West Bank. It is in stark contrast to the emergency department a few floors below.

Every organisation I visited is in need of funding for new facilities. The polyclinic, for example, is in the process of building a new hospital but the work is in abeyance until new funding is secured. Many of the departments are finished but they are not allowed to open until they have a fully functioning ICU.

**Centres for children with disabilities**

Numerous organisations have been founded in Bethlehem to provide care for children (and some adults) with disabilities. There is limited understanding within the community of how to care for these individuals. In the past, and still now in some rural areas, disabled children are locked away out of sight and are often abused. These centres teach life skills to give the children independence, and try to integrate them into the community.

The two organisations I volunteered with differ hugely due to a variation in funding and resources. The boarding school has less space and fewer staff members, making it difficult to provide sufficient attention to each child. The orphanage, on the other hand, has regular volunteer groups and a resident physiotherapist, as well as a part time doctor and music therapist. Working with the physiotherapist, I observed how positively her work impacts on the children’s lives. Many of the them do not have specific diagnoses, so she must identify individuals’ needs and find ways to improve their quality of life.

She also looks for ways to motivate the children. For example one child particularly loves music, so they sing together as they do exercises and use equipment that makes sounds as a way to encourage participation.

**Elderly care centre**

The family unit is very important in Palestinian culture. Most families live together their entire lives, with married children living a floor above their parents and extended family living next door. As elderly people mostly live with their family there is little need for elderly care homes. I volunteered in an activity centre, which runs during working hours to provide sociable activities for elderly people while their family members are at work. I was inspired by the way
people take care of their relatives. This has a great impact on their health and safety because they are rarely on their own. As well as providing a range of activities to keep the service-users entertained, the centre also provides regular health check-ups.

**Overall experience**

I am grateful for the opportunity to visit Bethlehem, and for the wonderful hospitality I was shown. The strong sense of community is inspiring as it ensures all members of society are looked after. This sense may be heightened by the unification of Palestinians as they struggle together with life under occupation. I heard many accounts of these personal struggles and witnessed the daily oppression they endure. It is remarkable to see their care for one another and hope for the future despite the atrocities that surround them.

I was often challenged by differences between the Palestinian culture and my own; I struggled to know how to appropriately implement my medical knowledge and understanding. For example, on an outing a boy was severely scalded with hot oil and those around me suggested flour or salt for the burns. I tried to explain that he needed water to cool the burns and that he must go to hospital as the damage was extensive. Without a good grip on the language it was difficult to know how to intervene; I was wary of the fact that I am not yet a qualified professional and I do not share the same traditions, but I wanted to do all I could to help the boy. Similar situations occurred regularly as there are few health and safety laws. It is difficult to put these laws in place when there is no stable authority able to implement them. The multitude of accidents increases pressure on the under-resourced hospitals and serves to exacerbate the difficulties facing the health sector.

My time in the West Bank has served to deepen my interest in global and public health. I have seen how important outside factors are in shaping the care that is provided, and my experiences have better prepared me to embark on the first clinical year of my medical degree. I look forward to continuing my learning.