I wanted to make most of this Summer by travelling to an unfamiliar community and gain an insight into a clinical setting where healthcare standards, lifestyle and cultures are different. I could not be happier with the choice of the Philippines. It is a stunningly beautiful country inhabited by extremely friendly people, which can be made the most of because of their proficiency in English.

I went to a 2-week clinical placement in a city called Iloilo, which is at the heart of Panay Island of the Philippines. This was organised by an elective organiser called ‘Work the World’ and I had a one-on-one mentoring throughout whilst working in various Governmental care facilities including city hall hospital, outreach centres and elementary schools. I was blessed with amazing supervisors who had high professional standards and didn’t object to giving me chances to actively get involved in patient care. It was a privilege to work with them and as a result, I have had the time of my life and have phenomenally grown as an individual.

The support of Work the World were consistently amazing. They were very quick at processing my application and answering any questions I had. Once my placement was confirmed, they provided some information pack and phone calls to ensure that I was thoroughly prepared and they made sure to understand my expectations to tailor to my needs. Although our flight was severely delayed, the Work the World staff was very quick at responding to the sudden change of plan and made sure to welcome us at the airport with open arms. They took us to a cozy house and the students and the staff were all so lovely that we instantly felt at home. Gerry and Mcoy, the catering masters made really delicious meals every day and I still miss their food so much!

On the first day, we had an orientation day and the staffs showed us around the Iloilo city and we learned about the culture and how to get around the city. They also took us to a local restaurant where we discovered how mouth-watering Filipino food is. I instantly fell in love with the local dishes and I am glad that I got to try lots of them. My favourites were:

- Bangus (milkfish)
- Ginataang kalabasa at sitaw (butternut squash and coconut milk stew)
- Halang-halang (spicy minced meat on a bed of homemade chips)
- Baked oysters
- Mangoes – Filipino mangoes are so delicious, and cheap! Mango shake is a must-try.

Work the World has also organised 2 language lessons with the lovely lady named Allyn, who taught us some of the relevant bits of the local language called Hiligaynon. Although most people in the Philippines speak English well, it turned out to be a vital tool to get around the city and she taught us some Dental words (e.g. pain, open/close, numb, rinse etc) that were very useful for building rapports with patients; although I must admit that people initially found my accents quite amusing!
On work days, I spent the mornings in the Iloilo city hall hospital and afternoons were spent in outreach centres or schools. They are all run by the government in aim to make healthcare services more accessible, and every workers there were always working very hard to compensate for the lack of resources, technological advances and materials. The demand exceeds supply significantly. But despite the challenging environment, people always kept their positivity and were cheerful. They were all so kind taking great care of me and always were generous with sharing knowledge. It was so inspiring; every moment was educationally and humbly enriching.

The majority of the patients came in to have extractions as they cannot afford other conventional restorative treatments. As a result, there was a significant number of young people with already multiple missing teeth. It was heart breaking to see the cost being the limiting factor too often. It made me realise how lucky we are to have NHS. The sugar consumption is very high in Filipino diet and the lack of preventative knowledge was apparent.

When I visited schools, I saw numerous children as young as 10 with multiple decays on newly erupted adult teeth. When I visited a class of 6-year-olds, I saw only 4 out of 40 children who were classified as ‘orally fit’ i.e. no decays in their teeth. It was eye-opening to see the complex cultural and socioeconomic reasons behind the existing diversity in the standards and attitudes in healthcare.

Another noticeable observation was the very high pain tolerance amongst patients. It became apparent that patients, including young children, really appreciated receiving treatments and it was overwhelming to realise how much we were helping them. All of the children receiving anaesthetics and extractions tolerated very well (in fact they were happy) and they were so proud that they were showing off to other classmates..! It made me realise that a
large part of pain perception is psychological, which is largely determined by culture. Seeing the children was the highlight of this trip; they were so loving and sweet!
Weekends were spent travelling and I went with other students to a place called ‘Antique’, which is 3 hours away by driving. The trip was jam-packed with lots of adventures such as zip lining, kayaking, hiking and wild swimming at waterfalls. The nature is outstandingly beautiful; the ocean was the clearest I have ever seen and it was very warm to swim. The most memorable experience was visiting an island called Mararison; it is a small island and the local children’s choir welcomed us with many beautiful songs. The talent was so incredible, and to hear such with a breathtaking view of the surrounding nature will no doubt remain in my heart. We had a great time playing with them on the beach and in the ocean afterwards.
I am so grateful that I had this opportunity to meet lots of new incredible people from all over the world who supported and taught me a lot. I truly miss everyone and would definitely go back to experience this again. I gained lots of invaluable experiences that will help myself develop as a person and also become a better healthcare professional. It is a worthwhile learning opportunity and I would recommend this to everyone. I would like to thank all of the staffs of the World the World and at the placements for making my trip wonderful, and I am very grateful for Queen Mary for helping me fund for this trip. Salamat (thank you)!