

Brazil 2015 – Expeditions Fund Report

In August of 2015 I went to Rio de Janeiro, Brasil as part of a medical student exchange with the IFMSA. I spent just over four weeks working within the general surgery department of the Clementino Fraga Filho University Hospital. In this report I am going to describe my experiences both professionally and personally, as it was really a life-changing month that allowed me to develop as a person enormously.

Before arriving in Rio I had been given very little information about my exchange. I was very nervous and fearful as lots of my own research and hearsay from family and friends told tales of violent crime, kidnapping and theft being commonplace. I was cautious to say the least.

Greeted at the airport by my host, Larissa, my mind was put at ease somewhat. I was so lucky to have someone to take care of me the whole time. I had arrived a few days before the start of my placement to allow time to get used to the city and learn how everything works.

I was immediately taken aback by how polluted the air was. I realised the reasons why when talking to Larissa I learnt that people do not recycle, they drive everywhere using a diesel/ethanol mixture fuel that is terrible for the environment. I have never seen people so environmentally unconscious and wasteful.

Larissa spoke excellent English, but her family spoke only Portuguese. I had been told that my knowledge of Spanish would be sufficient to allow me to communicate with people, but I soon learnt this was far from the case. My greatest obstacle was not being able to understand the doctors in the hospital. For the first few days of my placement I really struggled. The consultant spoke excellent English, but on the ward rounds he spoke solely in Portuguese, though he knew I could not understand. At the end of each round he would turn to me and ask how my learning of Portuguese was coming along. It left me feeling really lost and demoralised. As a person who is used to being able to ask lots of questions, be independent and be in control, I was in a position where I had to rely on others for everything. It was like being a child. I had to find out what was happening my asking people who spoke English to translate for me. My Portuguese did improve drastically over the course of the month, but nonetheless was not sufficient to have detailed medical conversations.

It was this initial challenge that taught me the most. I had two options: 1) give up and learn nothing my whole placement or 2) take control of my own learning and be proactive. I chose option two. The next day I went into the hospital, waited till the end of his ward round and asked to speak to the Consultant. He tried to fob me off, told me to speak to someone else and gave me small tasks to do. I am so glad that in that moment I stood up for myself and demanded a viable solution. I asked him to introduce me to every member of staff who spoke English and move me to theatres, where speaking to patients would not be an

issue. Begrudgingly he did so, and from then on I had the most incredible experience.

I was paired with a trainee surgeon called Fernando who spoke perfect English and was an excellent teacher. For the rest of the month I assisted in all of his surgeries, suturing up his patients at the end and learning more and more each day. I was granted a level of responsibility I had never been given in the UK.

It was while working in theatres that I noticed the discrepancies between the Brazilian and the British state health care systems. The Brazilian state health system was only created in 1990, and is severely lacking in funding. The hospital was dilapidated and poorly maintained, though it was only built 20 years ago. There was no air conditioning or thermoregulation in the hospital, leaving sick patients bearing the Brazilian heat. In theatres gowns were reused and the air was not filtered. Hand washing practices fell below the standards I had been taught in the UK. It was all quite shocking.

When talking to a doctor called Natalia about this, she told me how in the private hospitals things are much better. She described how it is very difficult for the doctors working in the state hospitals because they have been trained to deliver excellent care, but they do not have the resources to do so. She spoke of patients dying because there was not enough money for their treatment and of situations where the doctors teamed together to pay for a patient's treatment. This is unheard of in the UK.

With all of the criticism the NHS has been receiving, as the best healthcare system in the world, I really appreciate what we have. Not only does the NHS provide patients with the care they need, it allows doctors safer working conditions where cost is not the forefront of their mind. I very much hope it stays this way.



From an intellectual perspective, I saw pathologies that are virtually unheard of in the UK. I assisted in the removal of a spleen that was more than ten times its normal size and the condition had gone untreated for so long. I saw many

patients with hepatitis, and huge amounts of diabetes. Type two diabetes is a huge problem in Brazil. My perception of Brazilian people had been beautiful, toned, tanned athletic physiques with healthy diets. This is far from the truth for most. The traditional food, though very delicious, is fatty, salty, high in sugar and just not suited to the sedentary lives they lead.



I grew as a person enormously throughout my time in Rio. The challenge of finding my place in the hospital was one problem. I also needed to make friends. I am a very social person at home and have some kind of engagement virtually every day. I found it difficult to suddenly be in a place where I knew no one and could not do the things I wanted to do. I had to be extremely friendly, really

putting myself out there to make sure I made friends who could show me around and teach me about the country. In my free time I visited the famous sites, absorbed the culture, enjoyed the nightlife and the beautiful scenery. I have made some friends for life and we are already planning trips together. Brazil taught me true independence. It taught me how to fend for myself and how to ensure I get the best out of a situation. In my first week when I felt lonely and homesick and called my Mum she told me to catch a flight home. I am so very glad I did not do as she said for I am so much the wiser for it.

Pictured above are some of places I visited and the people I met. Stunning vistas and beautiful weather (even though it was winter!) made for an incredible month.