

Expedition 2017 – Medicine in Brazil

In August 2017, I went to Botucatu, a city in the southeastern region of Brazil located in the state of São Paulo, as part of a medical student exchange with the International Federation of Medical Students' Association (IFMSA). I was on placement for just under 4 weeks at the Hospital das Clinicas de Botucatu, a large teaching hospital with an attached university (UNESP). My placement was in the department of Sports Medicine but I also spent a significant amount of time in Orthopaedics. The whole exchange was honestly one of the most life-changing experiences I have had and had contributed to my growth both personally and professionally.

Before arriving in Botucatu, I had been given some basic information and my host had been in contact to give me detailed information of how to get the city as I would have to take a bus from Sao Paulo city. This information proved vital as my Portuguese on arrival was quite limited and the signs and directions posted around the airport were difficult to follow. From my research, I was quite wary due to Brazil's reputation for violent crime and theft being common, especially as I clearly looked like a tourist and had to use my phone in public to communicate with my host.

Finally, after a long journey, I arrived in Botucatu where my host, Jose, greeted me. My main concerns were quickly put to ease as Jose was incredibly friendly and we quickly became friends. He also spoke good English and informed me that most of the doctors and students spoke English and agreed to help me get a better conversational level of Portuguese. I soon met the other exchangers who were from a whole host of countries including France, Sudan, Italy, Norway and Mexico. It was very interesting to meet medical students from all over the world and talk about our experiences of Medicine and healthcare in our countries.

My initial impressions of Botucatu were that it was a small city based around the university. The weather was beautiful despite being winter, the people were incredibly friendly and welcoming and it was remarkably safe and easy to move around the city in contrast to all I had heard about Brazil. However, I was told to be more careful in Rio de Janeiro, which I was visiting at the end of my placement.

When I started my placement in hospital, I quickly realised that my Portuguese was not good enough to understand the consults with patients. Some of the residents were kind enough to give me a quick summary of each patient after the consultation. However, I didn't need to know the language to watch and learn from the physical examinations. I learnt a great deal about different physical exams and special tests for problems in sport medicine. My supervisor for the placement, Dr Carlos Burini, was incredibly



Figure 1 Sports Medicine Department at HCFMB

welcoming, introducing me to all the members of the faculty and inviting me to their daily teaching. Each day, a different part of the department (nutrition, physicians, physiotherapists and biomedical scientists) gave a presentation on a topic within their speciality. I found this was a good opportunity to learn some medical Portuguese and I made sure to ask for English copies of the research article they were discussing to follow along. I also gave my own presentation on the topic of the structure of healthcare in the UK compared to what I saw in Brazil.

Although I was very welcome, I felt useless in that I couldn't understand a lot of what was going on in the department. This was not something that could be solved quickly or easily as I was only there for 4 weeks. I instead decided to contact my exchange officer to put me into contact with a surgical department, preferably orthopaedics as I have an interest in it. Fortunately, an orthopaedic surgeon asked me to come along to the daily trauma meetings and to theatre. I found this was far more beneficial for me as the surgeons and residents were able to explain to me the procedures and I was able to assist in theatre, and help in clinic.

A typical day for me went like this:

- 7:30am: Arrive for the morning trauma meeting
- 9am: Go back to sports medicine for morning clinic or resident teaching
- 12pm: Lunch time with the other exchangers
- 12:30pm: Daily research presentation meeting
- 1:30pm: Go read the notes for afternoon theatre
- 2pm: Get scrubbed in and attend theatre /afternoon orthopaedic clinic
- 4-5pm: Finish for the day

One of the first things I learnt about healthcare in Brazil was the divide between public and private systems. The state healthcare system was created quite recently, just 27 years ago in 1990. 75% of the Brazil's huge population (200 million) are dependent on the free healthcare provided by the Sistema Único de Saúde (Unified Health System). The hospital I was placed at was primarily a state hospital but there were some services that were private and at times, it felt like two separate hospitals. The medical students seemed to work exclusively in the public system. From what the doctors tell me, the public system is severely lacking in funding, there are few hospitals of similar size outside of the major cities, and so many patients must travel for several hours to receive any kind of care from a tertiary care centre. It wasn't uncommon to see patients in clinic that had travelled over 6 hours by bus to attend their appointment. They would then wait in the hospital for over 3 hours from when they arrived due to the saturation of the sheer volume of patients needing attention and a limited number of doctors. The experience has made me much more appreciative of the NHS, despite all its criticisms, is worthy of its title as the best healthcare system in the world.

In regards to the problems faced in surgery, I saw far more trauma in the 4 weeks in Brazil than I was expecting. Motor vehicle, and especially motorbike, crashes are extremely common due to the lax regulations on driving, poor roads and lack of education of drivers. Many people also drive without any lessons or without a license. Another difference with what I've seen in the UK is the progression of the disease seen at presentation. Due to the

limited availability of healthcare, particularly in rural area, diseases often progress much further and people tolerate the disease process for longer before doctors see them. This results in pathologies practically unheard of, and clinical signs that are we are told don't really get seen to manifest in some of these patients. For example, I saw a case of scoliosis that the patient had let progress until he had a Cobb angle of 80 degrees (the highest degree of severity is anything above 45 degrees).

I also developed massively as a person throughout my time in Brazil. From overcoming language issues, finding my place in the hospital and making new friends in a completely unfamiliar environment. All these were challenging in their own way. The exchange really opened my eyes to all the different ways people approach life and how our experiences can vary so much just within the profession of medicine. I am usually quite a private person and it usually takes a while to open up to people but I made an effort to put myself out there to meet as many people as possible. The result was spectacular, I made many friends I will now have for life and are planning trips together already. In my free time, I planned trips with the other exchangers to explore Botucatu and Sao Paulo, using the weekends to see the beautiful natural landscape and waterfalls. We also took trips to the Sao Paulo city together and made friends with the hostel owner who taught us how the locals live. It was an incredible experience I will never forget and I am so thankful for the opportunity.



Figure 2 All the IFMSA exchange student for August 2017



Figure 3 The UNESP medical school Faculty building



Figure 4 View of the Sleeping giant stones in Botucatu