

# My summer hospital placement in Campinas, Brazil

This summer I took part in a 4 week hospital placement in General Surgery at Hospital da PUC in Campinas, in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, as part of the IFMSA (International Federation of Medical Students' Associations) exchange scheme, which aims to increase understanding of global health and create links between medical students and healthcare professionals around the world. This was a life-changing experience for me. I'd never been to South America before and never even travelled on my own, so I had no idea what to expect from this hospital placement and exchange scheme. I tend to try not to form preconceptions of places I don't know, but it was still hard to ignore the horror stories from several people I knew of dirty hospitals with primitive equipment, chaotic wards and



The main private entrance to Hospital da PUC in the city of Campinas.

overflowing sharps bins when they heard I would be going to Brazil. However, when I arrived at the hospital what I actually found was a clean and tidy hospital with no overflowing sharps bins in sight, and in many ways at first sight it didn't really look much different to hospitals I'd been placed at in the UK, apart from having slightly older computers and ECG machines. In the emergency department there were trolleys with patients lined up along the corridor, but this does happen in some hospitals in the UK at busy times. I felt surprisingly at home at the hospital – much of the equipment, procedures, and general routine of morning ward rounds, shadowing the doctors doing jobs on the wards and changing into scrubs and crocs to watch surgery was the same. It soon became clear that there were actually some massive differences in how medicine is practiced, but these were mostly to do with the local culture and attitudes of patients and healthcare providers.

In my time there I attended ward rounds, shadowed doctors and local students on the wards and in the emergency department and observed surgery five days a week. Like the UK, Brazil has a system of free healthcare available to all (called SUS, or the Sistema Único de Saúde) running alongside a private healthcare system. Hospital da PUC offers both private and public healthcare under the same roof – there is a different entrance and different wards for private and public healthcare, but in general surgery the operations are performed by the same doctors in the same operating theatres.



The exchange students I met during my placement at Hospital da PUC in Campinas with some of the medical students from the university.

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One of the most obvious differences between this Brazilian hospital and hospitals in the UK was the relative lack of privacy for patients. There were no curtains in the wards, but for any particularly invasive procedures the local medical students would wheel over two solid screens to place either side of the bed, however the end of the bed was usually still exposed and it wasn't uncommon for other medical students linked to different teams and even for other patients' relatives to come over and watch! They also didn't ask for consent in the way we are taught to in the UK. I was really surprised that people didn't seem to mind this, but I'm not sure whether this is because they live in a society that is known for having less of an emphasis on personal space and they're used to it and not bothered by it, or whether given the choice they would have

preferred more privacy. Another example of this lack of privacy was that at this where I was all the operating theatres had large windows, and so any nurses, students or doctors walking past who weren't involved in the procedure could still see the operation (however, talking to other exchange students placed elsewhere in Brazil, this isn't the case at all hospitals in the country).

Another huge difference, which I really liked and which has changed how I view medicine, was the complete lack of hierarchy in the medical team. This was really strange for me compared to my experiences in the UK. Particularly in surgery, many of my placements in London had lived up to the old stereotype of having a rigid hierarchy in which the consultant would barely acknowledge the medical students and everyone seemed to show less respect towards those less senior to them, and I was used to feeling slightly terrified and in awe of the more senior doctors. In this hospital in Brazil it was completely different and quite a culture shock for me – the consultants would happily greet and chat to doctors at any level of their training, nurses and medical students, and have very human conversations about how their day was or how they were or life in general. It was also very normal for them to greet everyone with a hug or a kiss on the cheek (there it's the usual way to greet people, although in the UK this would probably seem like harassment or at the very least an invasion of personal space!). In the UK there is sometimes almost a sense that talking about other aspects of your life with colleagues would feel a bit unprofessional, but that can sometimes make people seem aloof or make it more difficult to bond with people. Things ran at a slower pace (which had both advantages and disadvantages) and people had a much more relaxed attitude, for example in their way of seeing things and in their body language. The lack of hierarchy and open and friendly attitude of many of the people there helped me feel a lot more relaxed and at ease and reminded me of something that should have been obvious, that consultants are also human - it's been really good for me to go back into placements here and not feel so terrified!

Although I very much liked the calm and relaxed atmosphere, in some ways it does seem to have its downsides. For example, some things were less efficient – after an operation, rather than the patient being wheeled off to a different room to recover from the anaesthetic, they would often stay in the operating theatre, during which time the surgeon would wait and chat to other doctors, rather than the operating theatre and surgeon being used for another operation back to back. So although the doctors were generally less stressed and there was a calmer atmosphere than in some hospitals in the UK, it was also less efficient for taxpayers and patients. As well as this, the relaxed attitude also spanned into attitudes about exposure to bodily fluids – people were less observant about wearing gloves or aprons while carrying out procedures that were likely to lead to splashes of blood. This really reminds you of the reason for the extensive measures about personal protective equipment in the UK – I saw a number of local students and doctors getting splashes of blood from patients on their faces or their own clothes that would have been prevented by wearing visors or scrubs for example, or tying back long hair.

I was very fortunate to see several procedures I hadn't seen in the UK. In the UK, "general" surgery is ironically fairly specialised: it often only involves the gallbladder, appendix and intestines, whereas where I was in Brazil general surgery was truly general. As well as the types of surgery I had already seen on my placement in the UK they dealt with a wide variety of surgery including incoming trauma cases, bariatric surgery and breast surgery. Throughout my time at the hospital I saw many procedures I had never seen in the UK, including CPR and an emergency tracheostomy being done for someone who was admitted following a road traffic accident, two stomach bypasses, a repair of a fistula, assessment of a trauma case who had fallen from a wall and removal of someone's spleen due to cancer (a particularly risky operation). Many of the procedures that would have been performed via keyhole surgery in the UK were done as open surgery, since there was less equipment available to perform keyhole surgery and fewer surgeons were trained to do it, partly due to lack of funding.



Lagoa do Taquaral in Campinas, the largest park in the city.

It was so interesting to see first-hand how your environment can affect your lifestyle in spite of good resolutions. In Campinas, the city where I was placed, I found it really difficult to stay healthy – I normally see myself as a fairly fit and active person, doing a lot of walking and running and keeping a varied diet, but the local diet was very different – a LOT of carbs, very sugary snacks, deep fat fried pastries and cheese and, apart from in the traditional beans dish called feijoada, vegetables were rare. At restaurants, if you ordered fish or a steak it was very common for it to come with chips

and rice and bread and no vegetable in sight! On top of this, in the city, there were very few green spaces and the only place where people could be seen running outdoors was in the main park in the north of the city called Lagoa do Taquaral. This varied from city to city – in Florianópolis the local diet was full of fresh fish and it was very common to see people out running or on their bikes, and in Rio the long beach with its stunning views made it easy to go for a run or walk every day. Like in the UK, obesity is an ever-growing problem in Brazil, but surprisingly I saw far fewer very obese people in Campinas, both in the hospital and exploring the city, than in London.

Throughout my placement I have been able to meet medical students from all over the world – Italy, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Morocco, Egypt, Mexico, Denmark, Russia, Turkey and Canada just to name a few!! I've made some lifelong friends and it's been incredible hearing about their experiences of studying medicine in their home countries and learning a little bit about how their healthcare system works. Possibly from the many negative news stories about the NHS in the UK, I had previously had the impression that the NHS is struggling more than most other healthcare systems in the world, but talking to all the other medical students I've been struck by how almost every single country seems to be facing the same problems of obesity, an ageing population and a lack of funding or resources. I've found it fascinating hearing about how different countries are trying to tackle this.



**At the beach in Rio de Janeiro with just some of the international exchange students I met on my exchange who were doing placements in different cities in Brazil, and a few local medical students**

decisive or take the lead in situations other than just force of habit and an unhelpful and slightly out of date view of myself!

Meeting so many new people and being in lots of groups of people with very different dynamics to groups of friends back in the UK has given me a lot of confidence that will be very helpful both on my placements and starting work as a doctor, by pushing me out of my comfort zone for example by organising trips or making decisions when I would normally assume my more assertive friends were more capable of doing this. It's made me realise there was absolutely no reason why I couldn't be

Aside from gaining a deeper insight into General Surgery, this placement has helped me grow in so many ways as a person. Meeting medical students from so many different countries and seeing healthcare from a completely different angle in Brazil has opened my eyes to the fact that there are so many different ways to approach medicine, some of which are neither better nor worse but just different, or more adapted to the local culture. I've gained so much confidence from going completely out of my comfort zone on this exchange, and from being immersed in a different country with very different cultures and having to quickly learn the way of life and navigate local customs with my basic knowledge of Portuguese! So far it's helped me be much more proactive on my final year placements in medical school, as well as feeling more confident in other areas of my life too, and my new-found confidence will continue to be helpful in my work as a doctor. I'm so grateful to have had the opportunity to go on this exchange, it's been an immensely valuable experience that will stay with me for life.