

Information for Students Undertaking Placements with Enga Health Services

April 2020 Dr Mills

E.B.H.S. is a health service to the people of Kompiam District in Enga Province in the P.N.G. Highlands. Administered by the indigenous Baptist Union of P.N.G. which has been in existence since 1949 and working in Enga Province since 1997 where we serve a population of around 60 000 people in what are some of the most remote corners of the country. There has never been significant health coverage of these areas and so E.B.H.S. is very much a case study of the setting up of health services in remote locations. This alone makes visits by students to this area interesting.

Papua New Guinea is a country of some 800 languages, and has strong ties that still exist between even the most 'westernised' PNG citizens and their traditional village roots. The pulse of traditional culture is unmistakably felt in the highlands, where outside influence has been the most recent, the first Europeans venturing into the Mt. Hagen area in 1933. The "first contact" between the people of Kompiam and the "outside world" was in 1951. This relatively recent exposure to outside influences, and the pace of change since needs to be continually kept in mind by visitors who sometimes struggle to contextualize their highlands experience.

Enga Province was one the most recent of the 22 provinces to be created and is unique in that it's population is derived from mainly one people and language group – the Engans, of whom there are over 700 000 speakers, making it the largest single language group in the country. Among other things, this means that Melanesian Pidgin, the P.N.G. 'trade language', which is widely spoken over most of the country, is not as widely used in Enga - Pidgin flourishing where multiple languages exist together in close confines. However, Pidgin English is easy to learn and we encourage students to try to do so, as it is well spoken by most of our staff and, in our experience, attempts to speak it, however poor, are greatly appreciated.

Geography



Enga Province is quite spectacularly beautiful. It's a place of steep, densely forested mountains, deep gorges and fast flowing rivers. P.N.G. has some quite large mountains, the biggest being Mt. Wilhelm at 14,793 ft.

E.B.H.S. is based out of the government station at Kompiam, 45km by road from the provincial capital at Wabag, and around 4 hours by road from Mt. Hagen. Kompiam is at 4900 ft. which makes it about the perfect climate, being shorts and loose shirts weather most of the time, with the longer clothing being needed at night. It rains plenty so if you have a thing against mud, plan another elective. You need to get used to taking shoes on and off a lot because of the mud, and so pull on shoes tend to be easier than lace ups. Having said that just bring what you're most comfortable with, and if you're keen to do some patrolling, the most important thing will be to bring shoes that are comfortable, strong and worn in.

E.B.H.S. are administered from Kompiam District Hospital, a small 63 bed facility at the station. This is where you will spend most of your time. It is the main draining facility in the area. We also administer 4 health centres in more remote parts of the district and 5 aid posts. Some of these 9 facilities are accessible by air, some by road, and some only by foot. We encourage students to visit one or more of these during their time and we will arrange details with you on your arrival. All students so far have recorded these visits as one of the major highlights.



Our services to date include inpatient and outpatient medical care, elective and emergency surgery, obstetrics, maternal and child health clinics, pathology, radiology, occupational therapy and a dental surgeon.

The hospital facilities at Kompiam are going through a slow phase of upgrade. There is a master plan for a total rebuild of the hospital and we have just completed the first three stages of this.

It is likely that building works will be going on when you are here and you may even be asked to lend a hand with various tasks around the place. The work of any rural doctor is never just confined to the medical and your experience on this placement as a student will introduce you to that.

Despite the large draining population, the throughput in Kompam is not as much as one may expect, the major reason being the remoteness of the location and the difficulty of access for most people. Unfortunately for most rural Engans, immediate, effective health care is still a dream. The individual departments are not large enough to sustain students continually. Therefore students will necessarily get exposure to several disciplines, which always makes for a better elective. Nevertheless, if you have a particular interest we will work to tailor things as much as possible to suit your requests.

Most electives contain a mixture of the following:

- Ward rounds/inpatient care
- Elective and emergency surgery
- Antenatal and perinatal care
- Maternal and Child clinics (sometimes involves day trips for vaccination patrols.)
- Outpatient work
- Practical Radiography (learn to take and develop Xrays)
- Laboratory work
- Patrols to outlying centres –usually between 3 days and 1 week duration. (Usually only one per elective and not compulsory)

Teaching and Research

We are well aware of the value of such elective experiences to students and so we do try and put as much effort into it for you as time and circumstances allow. You will rapidly appreciate how overwhelming the work load can be, so we depend on students to be pleasantly proactive in terms of learning objectives, and willing to 'keep their end up in terms of clinical responsibilities.

This is a hard-working elective, and not one for the adventure tourist. Having said that, we're sure you'll have a ball. We have a fairly good library so unless you are surgically attached to one text or another, you probably won't need to weigh your bags down any further.



We now have satellite based internet making Skype link ups, Medline searches and reading the news a reality! Students can connect up for free via ethernet cable in the business office. For data on your phone, there is a mobile network in Kompiam that now offers 3G. You will need to get a "Digicel" sim on arrival in Port Moresby, or make sure you have a roaming package with your home provider.

So far we have not asked students to do any specific projects while they are with us other than anything required by their universities; this may change, and it's possible you may be asked to conduct some simple survey work while on patrols, as even the most basic health statistics databases are very patchy in this part of the world. This will not be difficult or time consuming.

Getting to Kompiam

Students are responsible for getting themselves as far as Mt. Hagen. Most chose to fly in via Port Moresby although it is possible to come by road via Lae. The hospital organizes to pick you up in Mt. Hagen and drive you out to Kompiam. This is quite a rough trip in parts about 4 hours long. Although there has been some significant roadwork done of late, the high rainfall makes the state of the road fairly dynamic so we cannot guarantee it's condition at any one time, so if rough road trips are not your thing then you need to let us know. It is possible to come via light aircraft from Mt. Hagen to Kompiam, but there is no set timetable, and can be a little unpredictable. For incoming and outgoing students from the same universities, it is helpful if you can get together and try and plan your flights so that the incoming flight, and the outgoing flight from Hagen is on the same or next day if possible. The 8 hour round trip is difficult and we like to do it as few times as we really have to.

What you will Need

- Apart from clothes, toiletries etc you will need:
- Sleeping bag - if you want to patrol (sleeping mat will be provided for patrols)
- Good walking shoes that you don't mind getting filthy
- Stethoscope/pen torch
- Torch
- Mosquito nets are available here so don't worry about buying one.

Communication

There is a mobile phone service in the hospital area, so yes, your parents will be able to get hold of you (or vice versa) should the need arise.

Accommodation

We now have our new student accommodation available. This is a large elevated 3 bdr home with spectacular views out across the gorge. There is power to the house but this is only from 8.30 am to 10pm at night. There is solar lighting system for use after this time. There is TV and DVD player, solar fridge in the large kitchen and washing machine. It has all the linen provided now so you don't need to worry about sleeping bags unless you are planning to patrol. Mosquito nets are not needed in the house but we provide them for patrols. Students pay a fee of K50 per night to cover maintenance costs. Food is purchased in Hagen before you come down and we will help you find your way around the shops in Hagen.

Vaccines

Hepatitis A , B and Typhoid are highly recommended. All are endemic to the area. The incidence of Japanese Encephalitis in the area is not known and thus we have no data with which to inform a decision on getting this (expensive) vaccine.

Malaria is one of the single biggest causes of serious illness in the Kompiam district. Although around the hospital area, at 4900ft we think malaria is not present, nevertheless, the terrain is closely packed mountains and valleys and we know that malaria is present in some of these lower areas close to us. Chloroquine resistance Falciparum is widespread. Prophylaxis should be considered for visitors if you are planning to patrol. The alternative is to diagnose and treat if you get symptoms – rapid testing kits are widely available. This may be a better option for the long stay visitor. The options for prophylaxis you can discuss with your G.P./I.D. physician or Travel Med guru, but the options probably boil down to either Doxycycline daily or Mefloquine weekly. The pros and cons you can look into for yourselves.

Money

The local currency is kina and has been fairly stable against the Aussie for a couple of years now at around K1 buying A\$0.40. You will need very little cash apart from board costs, as basically there are few shops of significance in Kompiam apart from the odd store selling the ubiquitous Coke and Twisties. As travel from Kompiam is difficult, students generally don't leave until their stint is finished, so there are really not many opportunities to spend money. You can buy very good and cheap artefacts in Mt. Hagen, or to some extent in Kompiam itself. Currency and travellers cheques can be exchanged in Mt. Hagen and there are ATM's that allow cash withdrawals from VISA, but remember if you are flying in on a weekend we will probably return to Kompiam the same or next day, so there most likely will not be opportunities for bank visits. For this reason the best option is still to exchange some cash before hand. This can be done at the airport in Port Moresby or in Cairns, although the airports pay dismally for cash compared to the banks. Most Australian banks can get kina in if you give them enough notice.

Donations and Grants

Some students have asked about bringing donations for the hospital work. Although this is by no means a formal or mandatory thing, it can be useful if you wish to. It's best to check with us beforehand, as not everything that people may offer you to bring up, is helpful or needed here but many student contributions have been very helpful to us over the years.

There are some grants available for students travelling to developing countries so check these out. One more recent that has come up is being offered by Medical Insurance of Australia (M.I.A.) group, who can give up to A\$1500 toward your expenses. Check out their website for info.

Cultural Issues

It goes without saying that you need to be respectful of the culture in which you will be staying. Despite the rapid change, the sense of traditional culture is very powerful in the highlands and is by far the biggest influence on life here. Learning about it all is fascinating and people genuinely warm to students who show real interest. You may get staff asking you over for meals, and sitting around the fire in the grass cook house. Asking questions and 'storying' can yield some of the richest experiences in your time here. There are some cultural 'do's and don'ts' most of which we will teach you when you get here.

One relevant issue is with attire. The culture has its own definition of what's modest and this too is changing a lot in recent years. Particularly for the ladies this is still an issue. Loose slacks or skirts are O.K. Shorts tend not to be, although knee length or thereabouts is probably



alright. Tight or revealing tops are definitely not 'in' here either. Lycra is not appropriate here. Apart from that, most stuff is O.K. The church, of which there are many denominations in PNG, plays a very big role in the life of the country, particularly in the realm of social services. Currently 40% of PNG's health centres are administered by the church. You will certainly notice this influence a lot in Kompiam and people regularly and freely talk about matters of spirituality and faith. Praying with patients for example, is a regular occurrence. With many students coming from more secular societies, some may not feel comfortable with this (although to be honest it hasn't been an issue to date). Certainly you are not under any pressure to attend any form of worship or ceremony other than if you wish to.

Summary

As all students do, I'm sure there will be plenty of questions yet unanswered. Please feel free to contact us by email at any time if you need any further clarification.

Electives in a place like Kompam definitely have the potential to change one's life and outlook quite markedly and our experience is that that seems to be the case for most students. So be prepared to get stretched, work hard, learn plenty and generally have a great time.

Looking forward to seeing you.

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