Health care in an emerging & developing nation

Colombo, Sri Lanka

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Much like in Australia, healthcare in Sri Lanka has both a private and public sector. There are 555 hospitals throughout the country looking after a nation of 20.3 million people.

I was privileged to experience being a health care worker and practice my clinical skills on the patients at the Sri Lankan National General Hospital and the Lady Ridgeway Children’s Hospital. These are the largest tertiary hospitals in the country.

With Sri Lanka’s tropical climate, I was introduced to the area of tropical infectious diseases. The key disease of concern for many of the doctors was dengue fever with many of the children on the general medical ward having this infection. I was fortunate to have one of the country’s experts on dengue fever as my consultant who gave me valuable insight into clinically diagnosing the condition, the medical management and public health initiatives.

Prevention is the key with the locals using mosquito nets and mosquito repellents at home. The government has also introduced a special task force to eradicate breeding grounds for these mosquitoes (Aedes aegypti) and to educate the public about the disease.

This experience has been very enlightening. The amount of work put in by the doctors to see the amount of patients they see is amazing! Sri Lanka has come a long way with many of the modern facilities available in Western countries also available in the tertiary hospitals. On the other hand, I got to experience firsthand how overcrowded the wards can get, with a patient to bed ratio of 3:1 at certain times. Even in such conditions, patients and their families are very patient and grateful for the free healthcare they are provided with.

I gained a lot of practical knowledge and was introduced to diseases uncommonly found in Australia. I would someday like to go back to Sri Lanka to work as a volunteer in the more rural areas of the country that don’t have as much as access to healthcare as those people I met in the capital’s hospitals.