Report of the AUGIS Travelling Fellowship 2013

Visit to Charlotte Maxeke Academic Hospital Trauma Unit, Johannesburg

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Formally known as Johannesburg General, the Charlotte Maxeke Academic Hospital Trauma Unit is recognised throughout the world as a leader in trauma care. The volume of trauma is so high compared to the UK that surgeons come from all over the world to gain experience here.

With the support of the AUGIS Travelling Fellowship scheme and the Mersey Deanery School of Surgery, I had the opportunity to travel to Johannesburg to work as a registrar in the Trauma Unit for 6 weeks.

Preparations for this trip started 6 months beforehand with a lot of time-consuming paperwork needing filled out for registration with the Health Professionals Council of South Africa (HPCSA) and with the hospital to obtain an honorary contract.

Upon arriving in the unit, I was given a warm welcome and tour of the unit by the acting Head of Unit, Mr Steve Moeng and then put to work immediately in Trauma Casualty treating patient and supervising the Medical Officers.

The Trauma Unit has its own Casualty staffed in 12 hour shifts by 2 Medical Officers (3 on Friday/Saturday) who are between 2-4 years post-qualification, and are backed up by the Duty Registrar and Consultant both on 24hr call. There is a 9-bed Trauma ITU run by the Trauma Surgeons, and 8-bed HDU and 14-bed ward.

It is an extremely busy unit. In the 6 weeks I was working there, I was involved in over 300 Priority 1 resuscitations and dealt with over 70 gunshots and over 170 stabbings in addition to numerous blunt traumas and assaults. In theatre, the consultants were keen to train and I had the opportunity to be involved in around 50 cases and personally performed over 20 cases including thoracotomies, sternotomies and multiple laparotomies including gunshot and stabbing injuries to the chest, stomach, liver, pancreas, spleen, kidneys and IVC (twice…).

Left) A moment of relief as the spleen is out and the bleeding controlled. I’m showing one of the junior registrars who to do a splenectomy with the consultant working the camera

Lack of funds within the Government Health Care system has left huge equipment shortages
throughout the hospital. In casualty, we were often faced with monitors and BP cuffs not working meaning that critically ill patients were being resuscitated without these basic observations available. There were no portable vents meaning that intubated patients requiring CT had to be hand-bagged by doctors to the scanner and back, as well as during the scan itself by standing next to the CT scanner with a lead apron on. In theatre, there was always a shortage of many common sutures, skin clips and often diathermy pads had to be reused between multiple patients.

As well has working at the hospital, I had the opportunity to spend time in a pre-hospital setting to witness this aspect of trauma care and spent an enjoyable time on the helicopter with the NetCare HEMS team flying all over Gauteng Province picking up critically injured patients.

(Left) Pre-hospital with the NetCare 911 heli. This was a polytrauma call to nearby Pretoria.

I had an incredible experience in Johannesburg and was lucky enough to gain so much practical experience, but it was hard work. The working day started at 7am and I worked 24 hours on call every 2-3 day including 48 hours every Friday and Saturday as these were the busiest nights. At over 100 hours a week for 6 weeks in a row, I was more than happy to finish and come just to get some sleep!!

(Right) Saying good bye on my last day with Dr Steve Moeng (Head of Trauma). We got on well together, it was a great 2 months and I was sad to go....

My aims from my trip had been to gain experience in the management of trauma patients, gain operative experience of complex trauma, particularly in UGI/HPB trauma as well to have an enjoyable experience of working in another country meeting new people. I certainly feel that I met and surpassed these aims and would recommend this experience to others. I thank AUGIS for supporting me in this wonderful trip.