



Pre-Medicine Internship Program

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Living A Dream: A Reflection of My Time Spent in Kenya

People experience dreams everyday. Whether it is a fictional fantasy that ends with the awakening from sleep, or a quest towards conquering an objective goal that someone aspires to accomplish, dreams are a fundamental part of the human experience. Similar to everyone else, I have also experienced both of these types of dreams but, to me, there has always been one dream that stands out above the rest: changing people's lives through providing healthcare. This has been my lifelong dream for as long as I can remember, though I had never had the opportunity to see it through until I had the extraordinary opportunity of visiting Kenya with International Medical Aid. My time spent at Coast General Teaching and Referral Hospital (CGTRH) taught me so many valuable lessons, not only in the field of medicine, but in the world as a whole. I had the privilege of spending three weeks in Mombasa, and each of these weeks can be reflected with just one word: inspiring, transformative, and informative.

I began my internship in the pediatric department, alternating between in-patient and out-patient, with my experiences here being reflected in the word inspiring. Of all of my time spent in Kenya, this week was the most gut-wrenching, pushing me to my emotional limits as I watched children, as well as their parents, suffering the unimaginable. Too many children suffer every day, and witnessing this first hand reminded me of why I have always wanted to go into the field of medicine, specifically pediatrics. On my first day, I witnessed a little girl with an incurable malignoma, who was kept in the in-patient unit for palliative care. She was kept in the in-patient ward my whole week in that rotation, until my last day, when she was sent home, since there was nothing more the hospital could do to help her. This case, as well as numerous others, were extremely disheartening, but they taught me that treatment plans aiming to maintain quality of life are just as, if not more, important than curative treatments. Along with this, I also learnt the importance of helping those who are less fortunate, as everyone should have the ability to receive the healthcare they require, without being bound by the restraints of financial resources. Despite Kenya's efforts to increase the access and affordability of healthcare for its residents through the implementation of primary healthcare packages, studies have found that there is still a significant gap between the resources provided towards primary healthcare and the normative costs of it, causing it to remain unaffordable for many individuals (Olago et al., 2023). From a little boy with epilepsy whose mother, despite all her efforts, could not afford to get him medication, to a mother who was having difficulty producing breast milk and could not afford formula to feed her newborn infant, I watched too many children be sent home without proper treatment, with the only reason because due to insufficient financial resources. A critical review of Kenya's healthcare system highlighted that a lack of essential medicines in public health facilities is an important factor that may contribute to increased demand for medicine-related out-of-pocket expenses from private facilities, thus increasing the likelihood of a patient purchasing substandard or falsified medicines from unlicensed outlets (Toroitich

et al., 2022). This injustice inspires me to donate more of my own time and resources to underprivileged communities, so that I can hopefully make a difference in the lives of those who cannot afford the healthcare that they deserve.

My second week was spent in the surgical department, which can only be described as transformative. I loved everything about my time in Kenya, but this week was my favourite! I have always wanted to be a pediatric surgeon, but I had never been sure of my desired specialty, until this week. I had the incredible opportunity of being in the surgical department during the hospital's "neuro camp", where a team of neurosurgeons came from Germany to perform procedures that individuals from the community would not have had access to without this camp. I knew from the minute I stepped into the theatre where a craniotomy was taking place that this was the speciality that I wanted to pursue, which is a moment that I will remember forever. Not only did I have the opportunity to watch the fascinating work performed by these highly-trained professionals, but I also learned about the daily struggles faced in Kenya, due to the lack of resources. Two instances stand out, with one being a power outage that took place during the extraction of a planum sphenoidal meningioma. All of the machines shut down, causing an instant pause in the procedure, with the patient's brain being left exposed. Another reflection of the lack of resources was when the entirety of an extraventricular drain had to be performed using a diagnostic camera, as the proper camera, which was requested by the visiting neurosurgeon, was not available at CGTRH. Both of these cases, as well as many others, caused struggles for the practitioners performing the procedures, as well as putting the patients at a higher risk of complications, both of which could be avoided with adequate resources. Studies have found that the lack of resources within the healthcare system of Kenya often causes additional healthcare costs for the patients, as the complications that arise due to the inadequate resources cause additional treatment requirements for that patient (Toroitich et al., 2022). In a community where many individuals already struggle to afford healthcare, additional fees should be avoided by working towards improving the resources available within their healthcare facilities. Ultimately, my time in the surgical department was bittersweet, as it opened my eyes to the differences in healthcare around the world, while also further defining critical aspects of my dream, making it one of the most life-changing moments of all.

My third and final week was spent in the cardiology department, which can be best summarized with the word informative. This week differed from the prior two weeks, as most of my learning took place in the monitor room, rather than in the procedural room. My cardiology rotation took place during the hospital's "pediatric cardio camp", so I had the opportunity of observing and being taught by cardiothoracic surgeons from Saudi Arabia, who were volunteering their time to perform procedures for children with heart malfunctions in Mombasa. The head cardiothoracic surgeon that was in the cathlab during my week there took the time each day to teach me about many of the most common

heart disorders in children and the various treatment options for each. He was highly knowledgeable, and I learnt so much from these impromptu "lessons". In addition to this, I also got to observe rare procedures, and witnessed some complications that could arise during these treatments. A case that stood out was a one month old baby who required a patent ductus arteriosus closure, but the anesthesiologist was having difficulty putting the patient to sleep, so they decided to postpone the procedure to later that day. When they decided to try again, the infant's left lung got punctured and collapsed, causing another delay in the procedure. This was an interesting case, as the primary complication that the patient came to the hospital with was a hole between the aorta and pulmonary artery, yet this condition was not the cause of the numerous difficulties that arose during the procedure. It has been found that complication risks differ between patients getting similar treatments for congenital heart defects based on entry specific techniques and entry points but, even when considering each patient's unique needs, unpredictable complications may still arise, sometimes being fetal (Stanger et al., 1974). This week taught me the importance of being able to adapt as the conditions change and complications arise, as well as the importance of having a deep foundational knowledge of every procedure to be able to fix any unpredictable complications that may have been unexpected in any given moment.

In addition to my time spent in the hospital, some of my most valuable take-aways from this experience came from my time spent in the community, which can only be summarized by the word grateful. Whether it was teaching students about hygiene and menstrual health, providing healthcare services to members of underprivileged communities, or just spending time in local areas, the people of Kenya are what impacted me the most. The pure joy and excitement of the students every time we entered their school yard was ethereal. They welcomed us all with open arms and greeted us with nothing but love and appreciation. In North America, we are so over privileged with everything we need and want, to the point that pure joy and appreciation can, unfortunately, be a rare occurrence, especially amongst the youth. Seeing these children, some of which struggle a great amount in their daily lives, show so much happiness, despite their hardships, changed my perspective on life, reminded me to always be grateful for every moment, and appreciate the small things that are so easily overlooked. Similar to this, the medical clinics were an equally eye-opening opportunity, with immense amounts of gratitude being reflected by every person that received treatment. Listening to patients explain their conditions, as well as how long they had been experiencing it without seeking help, showed me how important it is that we all work together to better the accessibility of healthcare to every individual. No one should feel the need to refrain from seeking care because of the fear of not being able to afford it or not having a means of transportation to reach a healthcare facility. These outreach opportunities changed my perspective on my own life, while also deepening my drive to go into the medical field to help those that are underserved everyday.

In conclusion, it is impossible to truly captivate the life changing experiences that I encountered during my time in Mombasa. These experiences are ones that I will hold close to my heart for the rest of my life, and the lessons I learnt here will forever be carried with me, not only being reflected in my medical practices, but in my everyday approach to life. The pediatric department taught me the importance of advocating for resources devoted to those in need. The surgical department helped further define my passion and lead me closer toward my personal goal in the medical field. The international doctors in the cardiology department inspired me to donate my time to volunteer in countries with inadequate healthcare, once I become a practitioner. Finally, the people of Mombasa taught me that everyday is a gift, and we should appreciate every second of it, as we are extremely lucky to live the life that we do. Not everyone is lucky enough to live out some of their most sought after dreams, but I had the extraordinary privilege of living out mine for the first time in Mombasa, Kenya, which is an experience that I will never forget. This experience will always be a part of me, not only within the medical field, but everyday as I approach all that life throws my way.

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