NAME: Susan Hendrickson

NAME OF THE INSTITUTE(S) /CENTRE(S) YOU VISITED: Corozal Community Hospital, Corozal, Belize

DURATION OF YOUR ELECTIVE: 6 weeks

GIVE A BRIEF OUTLINE OF YOUR ELECTIVE EXPERIENCE:

I carried out my elective at the Corozal Hospital in Corozal, Belize. This is a small hospital with only a handful of doctors serving a population of 33,000. While there, I interviewed eighteen female patients and healthcare personnel about contraception and abortion, in order to understand how these factors affect maternal mortality in this region. The interview consisted of demographic questions; questions on background knowledge, personal experience and personal opinions; and two fictional situations on which participants were invited to comment. I found a surprisingly low level of knowledge among most participants about available methods of contraception and laws about abortion in Belize. Particularly surprising was the finding that many healthcare professionals are also poorly informed on these topics. In addition, I found that religious views can heavily influence opinions on whether contraceptive use and abortion are acceptable.
**HOW DO YOU THINK YOUR ELECTIVE HELPED IN YOUR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT?**

The objective was to research how education on these topics and religious influences affect uptake of these public health measures, and to enrich my medical studies by increasing my understanding of other cultures. This topic greatly appeals to me due to my interest both in Obstetrics and Gynaecology and Global and Public Health. Immersing myself in the culture and way of thinking of the Belizean as related to their medical care helped me to better empathize with and relate to patients from different cultural and geographical backgrounds. In addition, understanding how local culture impacts factors affecting maternal mortality can help guide public health interventions by tailoring them to the population needs.

The results of my study are extremely important to keep in mind when implementing public health measures: blindly advocating contraception and safe abortion would be unlikely to be successful if there is a low level of background knowledge among the population and a high level of stigma associated with it. This project has afforded me a valuable and unique insight into the perspective of women and healthcare professionals in Women’s Health in Belize. This has helped illuminate factors influencing maternal mortality in Belize, indicating that public health interventions must begin with educating and informing the population, followed by increasing access to family planning services and abortion counselling, in conjunction with discussions involving religious leaders as well as the government and the health care sector.

This was a difficult process to complete because I felt emotionally involved with the difficulties these women face. In addition, the subject matter was a sensitive topic. It was difficult to conduct the interviews with strangers, especially as I was an outsider in their community, and did not fully understand the culture or people I was surrounded by. These are all experiences that will help shape my future as a clinician in the culturally diverse setting of London hospitals. This project has been invaluable in demonstrating to me that patients and colleagues come from a widely variable level of education, and social, moral or ethical viewpoints. I hope to apply the skills I gained from this project in my future clinical practice in order to improve communication with colleagues and patients, and thereby teamwork and patient care.

For a more in depth discussion of my experience and my project, please refer to the full report also attached. Thanks very much again to the committee for providing the means for this incredible and unique opportunity.

**SIGNED:**  
Susan A. Hendrickson

**DATE:**  
15/4/11