

## Dominic Katalanos- Medical Elective in Malawi

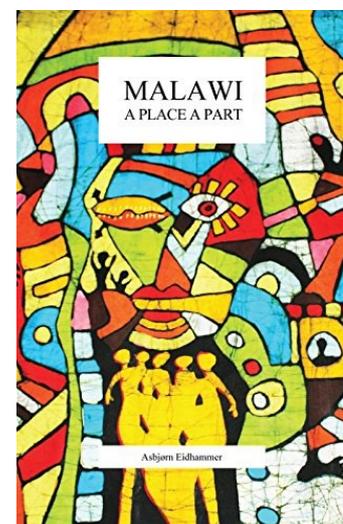
In the summer of 2019, I visited the Central African country of Malawi as part of my medical elective. The elective programme allows medical students the opportunity to visit other parts of the world to experience and understand health care there. Malawi was chosen because it was as different and removed from any experience I had gained whilst studying medicine in the UK as possible. Having never been to a less well-developed country before, I wanted to fully grasp what that meant; how it affected the healthcare system, but also how it affected the people. What did it really mean for people to live on less than \$1US a day (as the majority of Malawians do)?



The placement I organised was with the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Blantyre, the largest city in Malawi. I worked in the emergency department for 7 weeks under the care and organisation of the lead consultant Dr Grace Mpimbe, an exceptionally warm and welcoming person, and fantastic teacher. Emergency medicine is the speciality I am most interested in at this stage, and the hospital offered it as a 7-week block so I thought I would go for it and try and be as helpful as possible. Whilst in the department I gained a decent amount of experience of sub-tropical diseases such as malaria, schistosomiasis, and cholera. I was able to see the later stages of diseases left untreated (sadly due to poor access to healthcare) such as tuberculosis (renal manifestations, lung cavitation) and HIV that are (thankfully) rarely seen in the UK. Due to the lack of traffic regulations I saw a number of road-related trauma patients, most commonly patients who had fallen off or out of vehicles during collisions.

I learned to better integrate myself into teams of workers in the various areas of the department, which was initially surprisingly difficult as staff rotation and turnover was very quick. The majority of the time I was able to work within my competency as there were plenty of well-trained staff around to support me. Occasionally I would be left in situations without enough support because of staff shortages, but dealt with them well and felt my confidence grow as a result. The language barrier was difficult at times, but nearly everyone who worked at the hospital was bilingual, speaking English and Chichewa, so help was always at hand if I got stuck whilst trying to take a history.

My interest in public health and healthcare structure led me to continuously enquire about public health initiatives and how the hospital was run, and I feel I learned a great deal. To contextualize my experience and learning here, I read a very good book about the socio-political history of Malawi as told by Norwegian ambassador Asbjørn Eidhammer. It also gave insight into the political unrest I witnessed during my time there, some weeks after a national election. To further understand the country and its people, I visited a number of cultural and historical sites, such as the Jacaranda Cultural Centre and the colonial capital of Zomba. Throughout my travels, the brutal poverty was evident. Whilst nearly everyone was welcoming and appeared cheerful, the living conditions for the vast majority of Malawians appeared dire. Food insecurity is incredibly common, even in the centre of the wealthiest city in the country, Blantyre. I met some wonderful people, including our regular taxi driver Kevin, who always had a smile and a story to tell.



Overall, I felt this elective was an extremely valuable experience, helping shape and inform not only my medical practice, but also my worldview. I would like to thank the generous donors that have contributed to the Selwyn Medical Elective Fund, as well as Dr Whitaker and the Selwyn administrative staff for supporting me in undergoing this elective. Without their generosity, this trip would not have been possible, and I am eternally grateful. I would also like to thank Dr Grace Mpimbe and all the staff of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital for being so accommodating and helpful.

(Demonstrations following a contentious election result)



(A view of Zomba from atop its neighbouring plateau)

