

At the end of medical school, once you've completed your fairly hellish final exams, you are rewarded with an opportunity to spend eight weeks engaging with healthcare provision anywhere in the world (plus hopefully a degree and a job!). This is a great opportunity to get stuck in and see how different healthcare systems work, explore specialties you are interested in, and travel with friends around some amazing places. In September 2025, I opted to spend six weeks working in Vietnam with a group of 10 friends, followed by two weeks solo in Sydney.

In Vietnam's capital city Hanoi, I spent five weeks at one of the largest hospitals in the country, Bach Mai Hospital. During my time there I worked in the anaesthesia, intensive care, and emergency departments. During my rotation in anaesthesia, I spent most of the time assisting the anaesthetist in safely anaesthetising patients for surgery. This was by inserting intravenous drips, providing oxygen, putting the patient to sleep, and performing intubation (inserting a breathing tube into the patients windpipe). The anaesthetic process and surgical standards at Bach Mai felt similar to what we are used to in the UK. However, the strain on their more limited resources was demonstrated by the staff routinely using restraints on anaesthetised patients as they are waking up, to prevent them pulling out their breathing tube or cannula. In the UK we rely on nursing staff to prevent this, but the anaesthetist explained that in Vietnam there are simply too many patients and not enough nurses. I then spent time in Bach Mai's emergency department and intensive care unit, where the overcrowding and stretched resources were demonstrated far more obviously. I observed practices that differed significantly from those in the UK, including intubation without prior sedation, due to limited resources. I also witnessed CPR for the first time, with 20 people crowded around an elderly lady doing chest compressions, putting in a breathing tube and putting her on a ventilator, inserting a cannula, stripping the patient from the waist down to take blood tests from an artery in the groin. This was all done in the packed emergency department without the curtain drawn, so any patient, relative or member of staff could watch what were to be this woman's final moments. These patients aren't being treated with a deliberate lack of respect or empathy, but they are patients in a system shaped by different cultural perspective, limited resources, overcrowding and an intense workload.



Following our time in Hanoi, my friends and I assisted an American charity, Medical Outreach of America. This was an incredible opportunity where I assisted in the provision of free checkups for local patients near the cities Da Nang and Hue. With the help of translators, I met patients with Down's syndrome, learning impairments, polio, and those with injuries sustained during the Vietnam War. The medics that ran this programme were very inspiring, giving up their time and money to run these clinics. This was an invaluable experience that helped me get a better understanding of all the effort that goes into organising medical outreach programmes.

Finally, I left my friends and spent two weeks in Sydney, completing a placement in pre-hospital/retrieval medicine, with NSW Ambulance Aeromedical Operations. NSW is more than three times larger than the entire United Kingdom, so it is paramount to have an efficient system for collecting critically ill patients, and transporting patients long distances, as well as providing search and rescue and response to major emergencies/disasters. To deliver this service NSW Ambulance has road vehicles, planes and helicopters. I was lucky enough to go on several ride-alongs on fixed wing aircraft, collecting critically ill patients from rural hospitals in the outback and transporting them hundreds of miles to the larger hospitals in Sydney, all within a couple of hours. The teams are made up of doctors, nurses and paramedics. They were all very friendly and keen to teach, and I gained valuable insight into how a scarce number of retrieval teams are prioritised across the entire state, whilst reserving enough state-wide coverage for unexpected emergencies.



Overall, this elective was a fantastic experience and well worth five years of exams. It challenged my perceptions about healthcare delivery and strengthened my clinical skills. Medicine aside, it also allowed me and my friends to travel around and have some once-in-a-lifetime experiences in these amazing countries. Thank you to the OH Club, without which this trip wouldn't have been possible!