

Elective Experience

TRAUMA IN JOHANNESBURG

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I chose to do my elective at Chris Hani Baragwanath hospital in Soweto, Johannesburg - a city buzzing with excitement as the host of the upcoming World Cup. The hospital is reputedly the world's largest with 3,200 beds and 2,000 patients checking in daily, half of whom are HIV positive.

Upon arrival at the hospital, I met with the head of trauma, Professor Degiannis who is very dedicated and passionate about the provision of medicine to the less fortunate. He explained that students were treated as a member of the trauma team and in turn were invited to attend handover meetings at 8am daily...

During my first 24hr shift, we admitted 39 patients between 6pm and 7am. The theatre was busy and run by a registrar, a theatre nurse and an elective student, who takes on the role of assistant surgeon.

Elective students were encouraged to work the 24hr shift on New Years day, being the busiest day of the year. I will never forget what it felt like to enter the trauma pit at 7am that morning. There were beds and stretchers everywhere. The floor was strewn with blood, blood stained gauze and empty IV bags, and the corridors were filled with patients slumped over and bleeding through their gauze compresses. The resuscitation area which was equipped to treat up to 13 critical traumas was filled with over thirty patients. Patients were injured from gun shots, axes, multiple stab wounds, glass bottles, whips, pangas (a sickle-like farming instrument), machetes and acid attacks. They were also the victims of home-made fire crackers and paraffin

wax bombs. We worked very hard that day and the number of patients did not diminish until 5:30am the next morning.

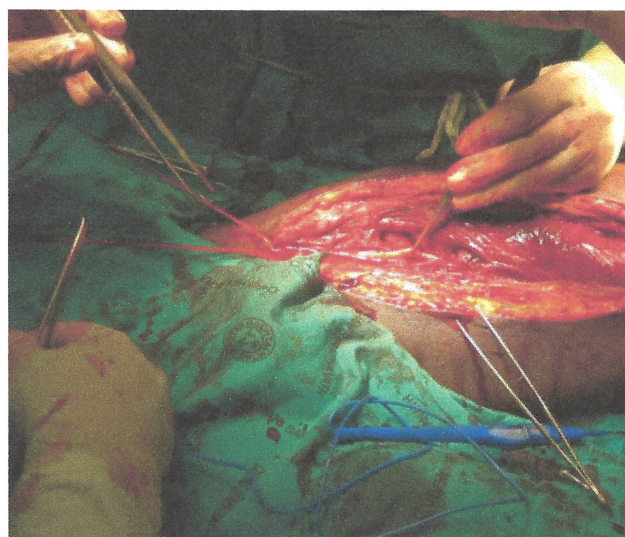
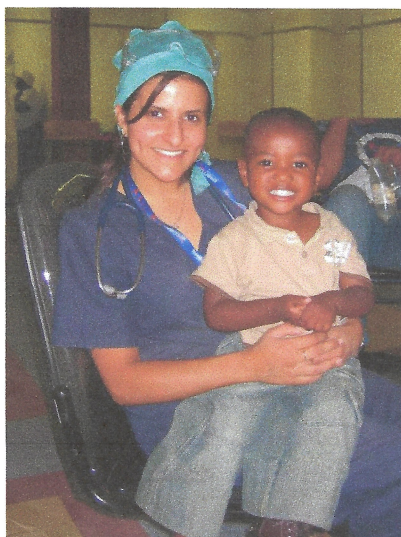
As elective students we were given autonomy and the responsibility of managing patients from the point of presentation. We were involved in resuscitating patients, escorting them to theatre, following up during ward rounds, working through complications and involved in patient discharge planning. In terms of procedural skills, there was ample opportunity to perform basic skills such as cannulation, catheters, venupuncture, injections and draining abscess. We were also trained to perform chest drains, central lines and intubations. The most refreshing aspect of the elective was the hands on experience. I felt like a useful member of the Trauma Team.

Prior to departing for the elective there was a lot of apprehension about doing an elective as a female, alone in Johannesburg. It was important to acknowledge the risks but to act with vigilance. I hope that the fear of violence does not preclude students from embarking on what could be an amazing and valuable life experience. Such an elective is great for students who want to be challenged and have hands-on practice.

After 5 weeks in Trauma, I travelled for 3 weeks. The highlight during this time was climbing Mt Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. At 5895m above sea level, Mt Kilimanjaro is the tallest mountain in Africa and proved to be quite a challenge!

"I learnt three important lessons during my elective. The first was that the human body is very resilient. Despite the amount of trauma I was exposed to and helped treat, there were only two deaths. The second was the strength of the human spirit. During the summit night of Mt Kilimanjaro, there were times I felt like I could not go any further. I was so determined to climb that mountain and so I kept going, one foot in front of the other. The third and most poignant truth for me was the reinforcement that medicine, treating patients, spending time with them and following them through to recovery is exactly where I want to be."

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Repair of a false aneurism of the femoral artery. Late presentation following a stab wound to the left leg.