



Working in Trinidad and Tobago

Trinidad and Tobago is an island country in the southern Caribbean, just off the coast of Venezuela. It was granted independence in 1962 and is a member of the Commonwealth of Nations. The population is 1.1 million, the life expectancy of men, on the average, is 66 years and that of women is 71 years. Infant mortality is 24 deaths per 1,000 live births.



Dr. Norbert Kastner

Medical care

Medical care is divided between three specialized hospitals, regional hospitals and local outpatient clinics. Public medical care is free of charge for both citizens and foreigners. During the past years, a private medical care network has increasingly developed and now covers approx. 50% of the medical services due to the poor care quality provided in the public institutions. Above all, the public institutions lack the required infrastructure.

Trinidad and Tobago has its own medical university which is associated with the University of the West-Indies.

The three specialized hospitals also function as teaching hospitals for students. To receive certification as a physician specialist, it is usually necessary to work abroad (mostly England or USA) for a certain length of time (at least three years) as a resident physician.

Organization

The General Hospital of Port of Spain has approximately 500 beds. In addition to departments for gynaecology, internal medicine, dermatology, there are departments for neurosurgery, thoracic, general, and plastic surgeries and orthopaedics. In analogy to the Anglo-American system, both orthopaedic and trauma patients are attended to in the orthopaedics department. Depending upon their size, the individual departments are divided into one to four units. A unit is overseen by a consultant who reports to the medical chief of staff.

Furthermore, there is the registrar (specialist training concluded during a stay abroad of at least three years), the house officer (1.5 years of advanced medical training after completing medical school), and the pre-registration house officer (PRHO). In the orthopaedic units, the PRHO changes every six weeks. Every day

In sharp contrast to last issues' field reports from the medical-ly advanced countries England and Norway, Norbert Kastner reports here on his experience as a volunteer in an aid project of the United Nations Development Project (UNDP) program. Kastner and his family spent a year in Trinidad, where he worked in one of the four orthopaedic units in the General Hospital of Port of Spain, the largest hospital in Trinidad.

one unit is on call and, therefore, is responsible for new admissions. Unfortunately, there is no joint meeting, round or transfer between the four orthopaedic units.

For the state-appointed domestic physicians, there is no provision for compulsory presence in their old contracts and so they are able to pursue their private activities even during the official work hours (7:30 am to 3:00 pm). From this, the following situation arises: The population's poor, who cannot afford private treatment, is tended by few and, in part, very inexperienced doctors.

The surgical departments share four operating theatres each day until 3:00 pm. During the night shift, there is one shared operating room for emergencies. The emergency cases are given preliminary treatment in the emergency unit and, later, if necessary they are assigned to the unit that is on duty where an indication for an operation may be found.

Personal experience

It takes a very long time for a patient to reach the hospital in Trinidad and Tobago because there is no functioning emergency and rescue system. At the hospital, in most cases, there is another delay before the patient is seen and definitely taken care of by the respective specialist in the ward since the patient is first seen by the emergency physician stationed in emergency admissions. Due to the

very limited surgical capacity, there was virtually no capacity for elective orthopaedic procedures. The frequently essential infrastructure (physical therapy, sterility, etc.) also did not exist. Consequently, my primary task was tending to fractures, cuts and ligament injuries as well as gunshot wounds. But even in this connection the options were very restricted. For example, there was only one external fixateur, which was reused, and often the patients themselves had to buy the necessary implants such as screws or plates so that we could take care of them.

Also from the diagnostics side we were very limited. Many laboratory parameters such as CRP for inflammatory diagnostics, ultrasound or CT and NMR were not available to us; the patients had to privately pay for these services and usually could not afford them. Because of this situation though, the physician's clinical intuition is also trained and challenged. The inpatient medical care was everything but optimal due to the protracted conservative treatment of a fracture that was often carried out. Because there is a shortage of nurses and, additionally, the salary is very poor, the nursing staff's motivation was also very low and was seen with all the resulting consequences. For drug therapy, essential medications such as antibiotics were often not available. Once a week there was a continuing education meeting in which the students had a case conference. I, personally, would have liked an additional joint discussion with the other orthopaedic units, on the one hand on account of the learning effect, but also to achieve a certain quality management through improved communication.

In summary, I can say that it was a very intensive year for me, including from case to case depressing situations; for instance, when patients could have attained a clearly better quality of life or function, but owing to the lack of options, I could not offer them it. The numerous positive responses and the gratitude shown by the patients for the time one has devoted to them and for sharing their problems always renewed my strength and reconfirmed the rightness of my decision to spend this year in Trinidad.

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www.gov.tt

The official website for the public sector of the republic of Trinidad and Tobago in English.
General information about the country, economics, history, culture.

www.healthsectorreform.gov.tt

The T&T Ministry of Health, professional associations, information about health care, addresses, health facilities, health financing

www.trinidadexpress.com/

National news of Trinidad and Tobago in English

www.undp.org/

The United Nations Development Programme, the UN's global development networks.

www.visitnt.com/

The official tourism website of Trinidad and Tobago in English, travel & transport and accommodation

www.goinginternational.org

Medicine & health The international course and career guide