

EDEN HEALTH

The newsletter of Edenpark Surgery
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BUENOS DIAS FROM BOCAS, PANAMA

It is nearly 2 months since I departed for Panama with my wife and six children to work with Floating Doctors and I wanted to share with you all a glimpse of what we are up to here in Central America. We landed en masse to Panama City in late February; two days later we arrived tired but very excited to our final destination of Bocas, the main town in an archipelago of islands in North East Panama.

Mainland Panama's National Health Service works reasonably well but the indigenous communities of the Ngobe-Buble on the islands have been left behind. This is the population Floating Doctors serves by providing mobile health clinics specifically targeting these communities. The Ngobe mostly live without running water and electricity. Fourteen and fifteen year old girls attending clinics pregnant is unfortunately quite common. The Ngobe may toilet, bath and seek water from the same sources so tropical disease and poverty related presentations are frequent. Also increasing is the prevalence of Diabetes and obesity due to the widespread availability of fizzy drinks. Despite their challenges the Ngobe are a beautiful people and they are visibly delighted to see us arrive to their villages. They will queue in severe heat for hours to meet with the doctor, their patience and gratitude has been truly remarkable and humbling.



I will be working with Floating Doctors until the end of June, we commute to the base or clinics by boat each morning, it is very hot all the time here so it is the best way to travel! My weekends are free to spend with my family, it is beach tropical and we have no parental taxi service to soccer, rugby, hockey, GAA or scouts to contend with! Tadhg, Maggie and Oisin attend local Panamanian school which starts at 7am and finishes at 3pm! They were unable to speak any Spanish at the beginning, after an initial protest in their first week they now look forward to going to school each day. A very special part of my sabbatical is that my eldest two children Jack and Aoibhe can volunteer alongside me in clinics each week, clerking patients and participating in health education initiatives, all the while improving their own Spanish too.



Many clinics are multi-day, we are often too remote to return to base in the evenings, which means we move into the Ngobe communities for up to 3 days at a time. It is an experience settling in to our hammocks each evening with tropical & jungle wildlife trying earnestly to penetrate the mosquito nets. Luckily we have now acclimatized and now look forward to the clear Caribbean skies each night. I will be excited to share stories in person with you all upon my return in late July, in the interim I would like to pay special thanks again to Dr. Michael Cotter for working as my locum and indeed the entire Edenpark Surgery team for making our family sabbatical possible. Hasta Pronto!

Dr. John O'Dwyer