

I spent my elective in Hanoi, the bustling capital city of Vietnam, home to over 8 million people. I spent 5 weeks in Viet Duc University Hospital (VDUH), the largest surgical referral centre in Vietnam. VDUH is a public hospital that performs approximately 70,000 surgeries annually. I chose Vietnam for two main reasons; firstly, I wanted to have an elective somewhere that felt significantly different to the UK, in its healthcare system, culture, and clinical needs. It seemed sensible to search outside of Europe, and other students who had completed electives in Vietnam praised the friendliness of the staff and the variety of medicine that it offered. Secondly, the culture and history of Vietnam seemed so rich and unique, and I wanted to come away from my elective with growth in both my medical and cultural knowledge.



*Image 1: Some colleagues and I outside the original entrance of Viet Duc University Hospital, with its characteristic yellow paint and green shutters, typical of French colonial architecture.*

As a surgical referral centre, VDUH offered a mixture of both medical and surgical experience, which is what I wanted to achieve. My supervisor was an orthopaedic surgeon whom I shadowed during his shifts. Many of the doctors in the ED were surgeons, often specialists in orthopaedic or spinal surgery. This was a considerable difference from the UK, as we have emergency medicine physicians who are specifically trained for the ED, unlike in Hanoi, where surgeons rotated through the ED. Therefore, while shadowing my supervisor, I was able to split the majority of my time between ED and theatres, often visiting both on the same day.

Another difference I noticed was that the use of perioperative imaging and interventional radiology was significantly less prevalent in Vietnam than in the UK. Surgical and anaesthetic teams often conducted highly invasive and complex procedures without the aid of imaging, which highlighted their extremely high capabilities and skill sets. In the orthopaedic theatre, fractures were usually fixed and closed without the use of X-ray imaging. The surgical staff allowed me to scrub in, and I was able to assist in several orthopaedic procedures, including a complicated tibial fracture repair. I also observed numerous collaborative surgeries between the plastic and orthopaedic teams, who often operated on patients with occupational or road traffic injuries that required reconstructive and orthopaedic surgery.



*Image 2: Closing a tibial plateau fracture case. This was one of the few cases that had peri-operative x-rays in use and took a little under two hours to complete!*

VDUH receives a high number of road traffic accident casualties, which was evident during my time in the ED. I was able to clerk several patients each day, mainly examining them and discussing further investigations. The majority of patients were Vietnamese, and I spoke with my supervisor, who kindly translated each interaction. I met several tourists during my placement, which allowed me to assist them as English was often the most common language for communication.

All of the staff I met were kind and patient, making my experience incredibly enjoyable. I also spent time in the clinic with my supervisor, where we saw a mix of patients for post-operative reviews and those with general medical complaints, similar to those seen in general practice. My supervisor highlighted that this is common in Vietnam, as

they don't have a specific sub-speciality that is equivalent to general practice. I noticed the challenge of patients coming from extremely rural parts of Northern Vietnam and presenting late with significant orthopaedic problems. These patients often opted for pain management from their local healthcare facility and delayed travelling to a larger hospital. Overall, I was incredibly grateful to receive a mix of surgical and non-surgical exposure at VDUH, as it provided me with a broader understanding of the hospital and the care it offers.

The main setback I encountered during my elective was the language barrier. Only a few of the staff spoke English; therefore, ward rounds and MDTs were difficult as we couldn't understand and had to wait until after for a translation. Because of this, I stuck with my supervisor or valued time in theatres where the experience was more practical. However, the staff who spoke English tried to translate for us at every opportunity, and I do not feel that the language barrier detracted from my experience at all.

My time at VDUH taught me the value of clinical judgement and to avoid over-relying on imaging and investigations, which is something I want to carry into my future career. The staff were highly experienced and demonstrated exceptional clinical judgment, as evidenced by their ability to take thorough histories and examine patients effectively. It has also highlighted the importance of a kind and positive team dynamic within a healthcare setting and how this improves patient care. The teams were all very friendly, and there was no overbearing sense of hierarchy that negatively impacted the working environment. I will carry this forward in my medical practice and continue to cultivate positive and kind relationships with those around me.

I feel delighted with my elective experience. I achieved a balance of medical and surgical expertise that was hands-on and valuable, and I gained an understanding of the healthcare system in Vietnam by witnessing the variety of cases the hospital handles daily. I was able to compare the difference between these cases and those in the UK and understand the different care requirements for those patients. I also am incredibly grateful that I was able to live in such a buzzing and exciting city for 6 weeks and embrace a new culture – the staff in Viet Duc were so willing to help us get comfortable in Hanoi, giving us recommendations for places to visit and also taking us for meals in the local restaurants. Their kindness went a long way, and I will value it for the rest of my career, ensuring that I practice it myself when interacting with others.

I would recommend an elective in Hanoi to future students, especially those seeking a balance of medical experience and opportunities to explore the culture and history of a new place. VDUH provided a welcoming and kind environment where we met other international students and locals, making the experience truly memorable.

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