

Cultural contrasts

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Reaching Christchurch in the middle of July on a rainy, cold day was a little disappointing when we discovered that our baggage, with all our winter clothes, hadn't arrived with us on the same flight but, due to human error, had been shipped to Bangkok. You certainly feel the cold if, on the day before, you have been in a zone with a temperature of 48°C. Never mind, we spent all the time indoors in the hotel wearing our light cotton clothes that were specially made for tropical countries. At last, after two days, we received our winter clothes and all our baggage. How nice it was, watching my youngest daughter who was only three years old hugging and kissing her thick woolen clothes. She had passed her first experience with the cold. 'What a beautiful green city!' was the first comment from my wife when we rode in the tram across Christchurch city centre. It is completely different from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) where we used to live and work.

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When I started to practise in Winton, a rural area north of Invercargill, in a different environment and with a different system from what I was used to in the UAE, I was impressed with the number of support groups and societies for the patients and the doctors. I enjoyed practising real patient-centred family medicine, taking advantage of the excellent teamwork and

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being supported by the friendly community. The excellent quality of the feedback letters from secondary and tertiary services were an unexpected and pleasant surprise. In my opinion these are important tools for ongoing medical education for family doctors.

Looking out to the green plains and hills at Winton is very different from the yellow sand dunes in the Emirates. The UAE is located in the southern part of the Persian Gulf. It has a very hot, humid summer and a mild winter with only scanty rain.

The total population is about 2.5 million, of whom less than a million are local nationals, the majority being expatriates living and working there temporarily. The population of the UAE is quite different from that of New Zealand as it is a young population with the majority being either children or young adults. Insulin resistance, resulting in diabetes and obesity is a major and serious health problem among the local people, mainly due to the rapid change of lifestyle and diet in the last 40–50 years.

General Practice or Family Medicine in the UAE is mainly funded by the government, and these services are controlled by the Ministry of Health. The private sector plays a smaller part through some clinics and private hospitals. The GP's working hours are between 8:00am and 11:00pm, five days a week, with the medical centres being run by two different shifts of doctors and medical staff. No appointments are needed to see the GPs, people just turn up and the first to come are the first to be served! After 11:00pm patients are seen in the A&E departments. During the weekends and public holidays, primary medical care is provided by general practitioners who work with rosters in polyclinics located in the central hospitals but separated from the A&E departments. GPs use the hospital diagnostic and management facilities during this time.

In a city called Al Ain, a real oasis in the middle of the desert and also the city of the first medical school in the UAE, a group of enthusiastic New Zealand and Australian doctors worked hard to establish the Department of Family Medicine in the early 1990s. They en-

deavoured also to improve the standard of general practice in the city through an excellent vocational training programme. It was a privilege for me to work with them as a supervisor for the registrars and as a tutor for the students training in family medicine. I admired the skills of these doctors and how they were able to deal with patients from many different cultures and also to learn to work in completely different systems. Practising family medicine in the UAE was a rich cultural experience for me, as we were consulted by patients speaking different languages and coming from various cultures and from multiple ethnic backgrounds. Many of these people suffer from anxieties and stress of life away from their homes for long periods, some of them unable to visit their families and children for several years. They become depressed and worried about their families, especially if they left their home in one of the politically dis-

turbed areas or in a war zone. Consultations in the UAE reflect the demography of the people and the place. The most common language of the consultation is Arabic, the official language of the country, but many

consultations are in English with patients who can communicate more easily in this language. Many GPs in the UAE are familiar with some terms and words in other languages such as Urdu which is one of the common languages in the Indian subcontinent, as many people living and working in the UAE are from there. Interestingly, the medical records are all written in English.

In the UAE, as in any other place on the earth, patients try to select a doctor who can communicate well with them, but that is not always easy. A GP in the UAE may find him or herself inviting a practice nurse or sometimes the pharmacist or a receptionist who can better understand the

patient's language to play the role of interpreter between the doctor and the patient, as this is sometimes the only way to cross the language barrier. These consultations certainly lack privacy but patients are usually ac-

cepting of it, and have come to think of this way of communication as the norm. The worst scenario is when the doctor finds her or himself consulting a patient who doesn't know any of the common languages, and there is nobody to interpret, simply because the patient has come from a small remote area or even from the top of an isolated mountain, where there is a strictly local dialect. Even after working for many years there, I found myself learning new cultural issues every day. I learned that what seems right and normal in a specific culture could be wrong and abnormal in another, and what could be pleasant and beautiful for one eye could be awful in the other! I think that was the most important lesson I learned from my humble experience working with the different cultures.

Really, spending many years in the UAE with my family, working and mixing with people of different cultures and backgrounds has opened our minds and helped us to more smoothly adjust our lives to our new home in New Zealand. Looking back, those years were such a huge contrast to our life today, and we realise how much we love our new life here, where people know their rights and duties and accept and respect the differences among our many cultures.

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