

A Study of the Health Care System in Dominica

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Abstract

In this study, I observed the health care system in Dominica. I visited several locations across the island and was able to interview both medical staff as well as patients. The main foci were health care administration, the seven primary health care clinics, and the issue of mental health on the island. I discovered that primary care and pharmacies on the island are very quick, efficient, and cheap. However, there is a large difference when secondary or tertiary care is needed. It is not as well funded by the government, and many services cannot be sought out on the island. Mental health is one of the larger issues needing to be addressed. Strides are being made to increase the amount of people receiving care, but much work still needs to be done. Dominica is a healthy country and their health care system has spread across the Caribbean due to the success of free primary care institutions. With more staff and newer equipment the care here will blossom in the future.

Introduction

The Commonwealth of Dominica is a tropical island located in the Lesser Antilles, covered in lush forests with many amazing sites. The island catches tourist's eyes due to the many hiking trails and beautiful sites. The primary language is English, but the culture is rich in French and Creole. However, with the decline of banana exporting, the country's economy is struggling and there seems to be few opportunities for new jobs (Joseph, 2009). Through all of the hardships this country is facing, its health care system has been a model for many Caribbean islands. This system, like all others, has its faults but even the World Health Organization recognizes its efficiency by ranking it number 35 in the world. The Ministry of Health oversees all medical finances and care on the island due to the island being on a social health care system

(Pan American Health Organization, 1998). They have split responsibility into eight organizations that cover all major health issues on the island from health administration to the AIDS epidemic.

Dominica's health care pride mainly resides in the primary care system which thrives through seven clinics across the island. The type of care provided ranges from childbirth to senior community health care and they are open at 8am Monday through Friday. Princess Margaret Hospital is the center for all secondary care on the island. With only 225 beds and a population of almost 80,000, the need for another facility is immense. Some secondary care and all tertiary care require flight or ferry to another country because of the lack in health professionals and medical equipment (GlobalSurance Health protection around the World, 2005). The economy would improve if more Dominican's were able to stay on the island for care because more jobs would be available, and the money would keep cycling on the island rather than being spent elsewhere. Therefore, this is a main concern for the Ministry of Health and they are doing their best to improve equipment and technology so that more procedures can be done on the island (Government of the Commonwealth of Dominica, 2010).

Lastly, mental health care seems to be the most immediate concern in Dominica. With only a single facility and one mental health nurse per clinic, there is a severe shortage of care. The stigma behind receiving mental care is also an influential factor on why many people in need will not reach out for health services. The citizens of the island realize the need for more attention on psychological illness, yet without properly trained nurses and physicians no solution will be found in the near future. Given these issues, Dominica has found a way to set a prime example for quick and efficient universal primary health care that has already spread widely among Caribbean islands.

Materials and Methods

Over a twenty one day visit to the Commonwealth of Dominica, I recorded observations on the health care system. I interviewed both physicians as well as normal citizens about their personal feelings and experiences over many aspects of the medical field. Each person was recorded on an Olympus digital voice recorder VN-7200 and was asked to elaborate on a series of questions relating to the care they have received. Interviews were held on the phone, over email, as well as in person. I visited the Public Health Office in Roseau, which is one of the seven primary health clinics on the island, to interview Dr. Lewis St. Jean. I visited as well the Woodruff Bay clinic in Fond Cole to interview many citizens that were there to receive care. I also sat and observed in Princess Margaret Hospital and a dental clinic. All other interviews were from people at the Springfield Station or random encounters while in Roseau.

Results and Discussion

Dominica is proud of its primary care clinics, and rightfully so. The seven clinics around the island are funded by the Ministry of Health and offer a very wide variety of services free of charge. The staff in the clinics consists of one or more doctors, a head nurse, and many other nurses and specialists. People go to these clinics for practically all primary care including dentistry, eye care, mental health, a midwife, and more. You simply show up to the clinic, wait your turn, then go in and see a physician to have your problem addressed free of charge. On a few occasions they will schedule a time the next day to come back if, for example, if the clinic needs to pick up a certain medical tool. This clinic can also refer its patients to closer smaller health centers for follow up care or to Princess Margaret Hospital if more intense care is required. They also prescribe prescriptions that can be filled in the clinic or at a drugstore.

Overall, it seemed very well-organized and capable of giving primary care to the citizens of Dominica.

The Woodruff Bay clinic is one of the 21 health centers on the island. It was much smaller, and this particular clinic was only seeing people for dressing a wound and expecting or new mothers. There was no receptionist in this clinic. Once you came in, it was your responsibility to look around and remember who was before you, and then when it is your turn, you simply get up and go in. There were a total of six nurses working in the clinic, and when I arrived, there were approximately 30 people waiting. It took approximately two and a half hours for the nurses to see everyone, and then they stopped accepting patients that walked in after 11am. The staff worked diligently to get people in and out as fast as they could, and of course it was free of charge.



Image 1. A picture of the inside of the Woodruff Bay clinic in Fond Cole

Pharmacies on the island are another very interesting subject. In the states one must drop off the prescription, wait several hours before being able to return to pick it up, and then pay an outrageous sum for the medication. However, on Dominica, prescribed medicines are covered under the government's health services. You can pick up your prescription within minutes of dropping it off and the cost is inexpensive. One student on the trip with me needed two medications for a partially impacted wisdom tooth. The cost was \$18.88 E.C. (equivalent to \$7.07 U.S.) these same medicines in the states would cost at least \$50 U.S. Some medications on the island are not covered by the government however. It is often left up to the consumer to buy more expensive or very specific medications from private companies. Along with this, some citizens prefer to pay for their medication through a private company to get a better product.

There is private insurance available on the island, but most people are completely satisfied with the care they receive without it. From asking around, I discovered that the only real desire to get private insurance was for evacuation off the island in emergency situations and disasters. With private insurance, in these situations you are immediately air lifted off the island with no questions asked. Another issue is the lack of social security on the island. Over the age of 65, Medicare aid begins, but for those citizens who have been stricken ill or injured under the age of 65, there is no help from the government for them. They must rely on their families and small jobs to get them by. The government does the best it can with the funds it receives, but when there is a total population of just fewer than 80,000, and only approximately 20,000 are making a large enough income to pay their full taxes, the funds for the government are limited. To help with this situation, the government receives funds from other countries such as Cuba, China, and Venezuela. This agreement provides doctors from these countries as well as free care.

The government funds all primary care and the secondary care at Princess Margaret Hospital, but it mostly stops after that. Many people find it difficult to seek out help if secondary or tertiary care is needed. In most cases, no matter where they are on the island, they are immediately sent to Princess Margaret Hospital in Roseau. This is a difficult trip for many people, especially in emergency situations. There are only six ambulances on the island and with almost 80,000 citizens; this often causes a problem. I interviewed Miss Catherine at the Woodruff Bay clinic and she shared a very interesting story with me. After a blood clot in her lung caused her to faint, the cost for an ambulance ride was \$1,500 E.C. before they would even load her on. Next, due to the severity of her illness she needed to be transported to Martinique for care. This again caused a problem because the hospital there was so full that it was not taking new patients from Dominica. The Prime Minister wrote a letter to the government in Martinique requesting they accept Miss Catherine to their hospital. Without this letter she would not have been able to receive care. Her family was once again responsible for the helicopter ride to the island, the price of which I do not know, but once there the Dominica government covered the cost of her tertiary care due to the fact that her family could not afford it after paying from both the ambulance and helicopter ride.



Image 2. A waiting area in Princess Margaret Hospital



Image 3. Receptionist area in Princess Margaret Hospital

Mental health care seems to be at the top of most people's list when it comes to immediate issues on the island. There is a mental health ward in Princess Margaret Hospital where people are referred to after visiting one of the seven health clinics on the island and seeing the mental health nurse. For each clinic there is only one mental nurse. She sees patients that come into the clinic, and she also goes around town visiting patients to evaluate them and update their medicine. Due to the negative stigma that is associated with receiving mental health care, many people will not go seek out help. There is not much that can be done to change this. By going out into town and finding people that need help, the nurses in Dominica are doing more than most countries are for their psychologically sick. However this is still a big issue on the island with many people who still need help but not enough specially trained doctors and nurses to care for them.

Another complaint that I received from almost everyone I interviewed was that there was not enough medical staff on the island. Many nurses and doctors are overworked due to the lack of replacements in the clinics and hospitals. The clinic in Fond Cole is closed at night and on weekends because the people working there need a break. If this clinic and others like it were able to stay open they could possibly reduce the crowdedness at the hospitals. Another effect from the lack of staff is that patients are often rushed. It is very important to be quick and efficient, but the two can be negatively correlated and it is hard to balance them. Many people complained that they do not feel properly examined and therefore wrongfully diagnosed. However from my experiences, I noticed that even though it may take a long time to get seen, they do a thorough job once they get to you. The medical staff here seems to really care about their patients, but at times there seems to be a lack of discipline. Without the threat to sue physicians on the island, many errors slip by without any repercussion. The medical staff is

overworked which leads to a loss of motivation. Without more manpower it will be hard for improvement to come in the future. Even if the Ministry of Health was able to get new and higher-tech equipment, this would be pointless without properly trained people to work the machinery. There are two medical schools and one nursing school on the island, but after graduation, many people leave Dominica to seek work with better hours and pay.

Dominica is an amazing country. The Ministry of Health in the 1980's started the health care system seen here today. The main idea is to have primary care clinics around the island that are free of charge and have a large variety of services. This system with free care institutions has spread all across the Caribbean islands. Dominica's health care system has its faults just like all other health care systems, but hopefully within the next generation more staff and equipment will be available to the island to help improve its care and further build its economy.

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