Last year I was lucky enough to be one of the two pharmacy students offered the Mathew Peck Travelling Scholarship by Monash University, which allowed me to spend 6 weeks following my final exam in November working on an international aid program in Fiji.

The Ministry of Health in Fiji has recently made it a national priority to focus on the prevention and treatment of non-communicable diseases and as the population ages and the number of medications administered to patients increases, the necessity of compliance with the prescribed medications is becoming increasingly important. Frances Ng (an Australian volunteer) and Rashika Gounder from the Pharmacy Department at the Colonial War Memorial Hospital in the Fijian capital of Suva are working on a project focusing on the uptake and use of dose administration aides (DAAs) to improve compliance. And they invited me to help them out!

While I was there I was working out of the Diabetes Health Clinic in central Suva where I offered identified patients a DAA and counseling on its use. And then followed up with these patients (either the next time they are in the clinic or during a home visit) to gain insight into the feasibility of the intervention, to identify barriers to implementation (including errors in use) and uptake, as well as to analyse patient responses and feedback. This research is aimed at showing that Fijian government that DAAs are a cost effective way to increase patient compliance with medications and improve patient health outcomes, and hopefully encourage funding and supply to the Fijian population.

Working in the Colonial War Memorial Hospital also gave me the chance to help organise a workshop for nurses here in the hospital and other hospitals around Fiji to work with a Nurse Educator from Australia to increase their knowledge and ability in administration of chemotherapy and follow up care of their patients. The workshop is being made available for nurses who are already working in oncology to make their practice safer and more efficient for both themselves and their patients. This workshop is also being conducted in the light of new chemotherapy guidelines/protocols that have been written for the practice of oncology in the hospital.

Apart from these main projects I was also tried to explore as much of the Fiji healthcare as I could. I spent quite a bit of time helping out with clinical work on the wards where I was able to see the day-to-day running of the hospital. I also spent some time working at the Government Pharmacy, which procures medicines for the whole of Fiji (and some other smaller nations) under the National Drug Bulk Purchasing Scheme and then distributes them – a huge logistical task! I even got to go and see some of the nurses stations located on remote islands and how healthcare was provided to these isolated communities.

My time in Fiji was filled with overcoming challenges and learning to think outside the box, especially when it came to dealing with the logistics of running a trial in a developing country with limited resources and unreliable technology. However, the time I spent there is one of the best experiences of my life. The people in Fiji are so friendly and willing to help, I made many friends there that I will remember forever and hope to meet again!

There are so many people I would like to thank for the their help in guiding me through this experience. Gregory Duncan, Beverly Snell and Fabian Kong were great mentors before I left and while I was in Fiji and helped me so much with setting up my project and preparing me to get the most out of my short time over there. Also Frances Ng and Rashika Gounder from the Colonial War Memorial Hospital were a constant source of encouragement and I could not have asked for better people to work with! I would also like to thank Remedy from Monash University, for their donation of the DAAs that were greatly appreciated by the staff at the hospital.
And of course I would like to say a huge thank you to the Peck family for their support. This scholarship was such an amazing opportunity and has confirmed my interest in pursuing a career in international health and working in developing countries.

It was such an honour to be a recipient of Mathew Peck Travelling Scholarship this year.