In January this year I was fortunate enough to travel to Suva, Fiji for five weeks. This marked my departure on a journey of a lifetime thanks to the Mathew Peck Scholarship that I was fortunate enough to receive through Monash University. During my time in Fiji, I was working with the Fiji Pharmaceutical and Biomedical Services (FPBS), a subdivision of the Fijian Ministry of Health. I worked closely with the Essential Medicines Authority and my knowledgeable Fijian supervisor, Rashika.

Here, my focus of the scholarship was to brainstorm, build and exercise my role in assisting the office with a relevant issue they have been trying to tackle in Fiji – Antimicrobial Resistance. Leading on from what was previously achieved through the Mathew Peck scholarship, we decided to elaborate on this issue of resistance and pin point my research to focus on the understanding of an Antimicrobial Stewardship by pharmacists throughout Fiji. For clarification, an Antimicrobial Stewardship involves a systematic approach to optimising the use of antimicrobials through a multidisciplinary team of specialists. It is used by healthcare institutions to reduce inappropriate antimicrobial use, improve patient outcomes and reduce adverse consequences of antimicrobial use (including antimicrobial resistance, toxicity and unnecessary costs).

My research was driven by two studies; one directly with pharmacists in the Suva area who worked in retail pharmacies, while the other consisted with clinical pharmacists in three main Fijian hospitals. Both studies focused on the understanding of the concept of an antimicrobial stewardship, which was rationally done through a questionnaire-based survey that I built in the first week of my trip.

Disembarking my flight in Nadi, the biggest international airport of Fiji, it was both exciting and daunting to say the least! It was a humid 30-something degree day, like most, with a high chance of tropical rain. As I made my journey over to Suva, I saw with my own eyes how quickly the weather can turn in Fiji - the grey clouds formed, gusts of wind became fearsome and the rain fell hard in a matter of seconds. My first day consisted of finding my feet in Suva, visiting the markets and purchasing produce. Little did I know, everything remained closed on Sunday morning due to church and other religious gatherings. After settling in, it was time to start my first day at FPBS. Here I met Rashika and a group of glowing Fijians who were all warm and pleasant to me. Some of these people
included the Chief Pharmacist of Fiji, the Director of FPBS and the Director of The Essential Medicines Authority, who I would be working with.

In the first week, everything was new. I spent time getting to know my surroundings and began to immerse myself in the resources that I had available. I spent most of my days researching prior studies completed in other countries regarding AMS and how qualitative data was obtained and analysed through similar research. After gathering the relevant data and compiling template questions for my survey, I waited for the tick of approval from the Ethics Committee for my research to begin. I soon also learnt the true meaning of ‘Fiji Time’ and how gradual processing occurs in Fiji.

After approval, I was prepped and keen to begin surveying pharmacists. My first task was to interview the retail pharmacists. This part of the research would take most of my time as it included a lot a commuting around Suva and some neighbouring villages. Upon speaking to each pharmacist, I obtained answers to the study questionnaire. I also had the opportunity to get a glimpse of the opinions and views the pharmacists had on the matter of antimicrobial resistance. It was very interesting to learn about their ideas and possible resolutions to this issue. There were concerns highlighted with prescribers and their methods, pharmacists who gave antibiotics over the counter and issues with medicine affordability for Fijians. Pharmacists highlighted that there were huge issues with individuals only purchasing a few days of antibiotics instead of a full course due to unaffordability. Consistent reporting of poor health literacy as well as inappropriate use of antibiotics for symptomatic relief of headaches, pain and especially the flu was common. Most of the pharmacists recognised the importance of this research and the necessity behind having a stewardship program in place to minimise usage and ultimately reduce resistance. Positively, each pharmacist understood the influence they could have on the growing issue of resistance.
Hospital pharmacists also provided me with extremely valuable information. I first visited the Colonial War Memorial Hospital, in Suva, and spoke to a total of 12 pharmacists. The study questionnaire for the hospital pharmacists differed slightly to the retail survey, whereby there were more contextual questions relative to objectives that can be achieved in the hospital setting to reduce resistance. I was privileged to have visited the west to Lautoka Hospital where I met more hospital pharmacists after a very early 4am rise, which allowed me to see the coastline of the beautiful main island Viti Levu. Lastly, I was extremely lucky to be flown to the North Island, Vanua Levu, to visit the hospital in Labasa, which was very interesting.

In all three hospitals, not many pharmacists understood the concept of what an Antimicrobial Stewardship consisted of, however most of them were able to explain some of the stewardship objectives they already fulfil in their career as a pharmacist. Each pharmacist was relieved when discussing the stewardship, and to hear how the Ministry of Health planned implementation into hospitals. All pharmacists I surveyed agreed that as a pharmacist it was necessary to have a prominent role in a stewardship, however it was concerning to hear how little faith many had at the prospect of achieving success. Interestingly almost every pharmacist I spoke to were able to list the benefits of having an Antimicrobial Stewardship in place, although everyone would also list barriers they would face for a successful implementation. Human resources, finances, awareness and time were just some of the many comments I heard over and over when I asked opinions on limitations that the introduction would have.
Despite this doubt from the pharmacists, I have faith in the Ministry of Health to address the issue of resistance and help implement such a necessary program. I can say with confidence that this research will assist in the movement for a better healthcare system in Fiji.

Recently two volunteering Pharmacists from Australia and Sweden have also begun work with FPBS to help keep the momentum going, which is a great sign. Both are experienced stewardship Pharmacists who can hopefully achieve a positive outcome with the help of this research project I was part of. Further positive signs for improvement include direction and long-term goals established by the WHO, who pressed the Ministry to formulate a strategic action plan on the issue of antimicrobial resistance.

I could not have completed such an incredible journey without the help and assistance of so many driven and selfless people along the way. Thank-you everyone back in Fiji for facilitating my research and allowing me to experience a life-changing 5 weeks. Thanks to the Peck family for giving me this amazing opportunity to experience the world from a different outlook, and for enlightening me with one of the world’s greatest beauties.