The Australasian College for Emergency Medicine Winter Symposium, Darwin NT, 24 – 26 June 2009

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Final Report:

ACEM Winter Symposium, Darwin, June 2009

Michael Devlin, MBBS 4

Having just completed 2 weeks in the ED of Royal Brisbane Hospital I was pretty excited about all things ‘emergency’ when I found out I would be attending the ACEM Winter Symposium in Darwin. This seemed like a great opportunity for me to meet more doctors in the current workforce as well as hearing real accounts of what the day in; day out life was like as an emergency physician. I wasn’t to be let down and the week in Darwin was a fantastic learning and I must admit, sightseeing experience.

The program started with some welcome refreshments on the lawns of the Northern Territory Parliament House, with splendid views overlooking the harbour. The climate was just right at this time of year to enjoy balmy breezes and a great sunset with some of the most prominent emergency doctors in the country. There was also quite a large cohort of eager, likeminded students from universities around the country and this welcome was a great way to meet new people that we might be working alongside of in the future.

The academic program had something for everyone, including the students, trainees and fellows in attendance. Geoff Isbister held a captive audience with his talk on snake bite coagulopathy, which was held at one of Darwin’s great tourist attractions Crocosaurus Cove, home of the largest Australian reptile display. The audience was wide eyed for the duration of his talk, partly due to his flamboyant presentation and partly due to the 6m crocodile swimming in a tank just a metre behind the lectern!

A highlight for me was a succession of short talks held on Friday, given by seven physicians, about taking the direct, versus the scenic route to becoming a consultant. I think with the massive surge of students coming through the system these days, we feel a certain pressure to get onto training programs as soon as possible after graduation, which infers the need to know right now exactly what we want to do for the rest of our career. This places a fair amount of stress on those of us like myself who have no real clue what they want to do and find themselves enjoying all of their rotations, albeit eagerly awaiting each holiday break. The doctors spoke vibrantly and passionately about their own path through the medical world. It was extremely refreshing to hear that a tortuous and perhaps lengthy progression through a variety of jobs can be just as rewarding and often more so, than rushing to get urgently qualified. The doctors talked about their experiences in many fields including, retrieval medicine, rural medicine, MSF, paediatrics, balancing family with work and also

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about keeping up with one’s interests while pursuing a career; most notably, the mountain climbing
endeavours that Chris Curry has been actively involved with for many years.

There were a variety of interesting presentations in the academic program and I thoroughly enjoyed
the talks from trainees about their respective research projects. It was great to get a perspective on
the cutting edge research that is being done around the country, while getting a feel of what is
expected of trainees in the emergency medicine field.

The highlights are too many to mention here but I think the academic program was very well
organised and executed with many learning points for the students present.

A trip to Darwin isn’t complete without seeing some big crocodiles so I went on the Adelaide River
jumping croc tour, which was spectacular. Just an hour out of Darwin, you board a boat that the
guide tells you is small enough to be flipped by angry crocs, and dangle bits of steak overboard to
see the mighty beast clear about 75% of their body from the water. It is quite amazing to see these
huge animals that weight about 750kg flick their tails and rise vertically from the water. I was
sceptical at first about their size, as the murky water only allows a view of their eyes and dorsal
spikes, but when the guide tells you that “whoa this is a big fella!”, you’d better believe it. When
they jump out of the water you can appreciate the shear girth of their belly and the fact that you
would fit inside it with room for a friend.

The conference closed with a beautiful dinner by the waterside on Friday night and the great service
that we had enjoyed all week only got better and better. The food was amazing and the company
was great, such that everyone had a fantastic night with plenty of dancing.

I had what can only be described as an awesome time in Darwin at the conference and much thanks
has to go to the symposium convenors James Fordyce, Ian Norton, and Nadi Pandithage, for what
was a superbly organised week.

The symposium strengthened my conviction that emergency medicine might be the way forward for
me and has me more eager than ever to finally start work next year!
Lauren Quinn

ACEM Winter Symposium 2009
Darwin 24-26 June

The ACEM Winter Symposium 2009 was a two-day conference that was held in the beautiful city of Darwin in the heart of the amazing dry season. An exciting program was on offer, including focuses on emerging and tropical diseases, toxinology, Indigenous health, and trainee education. The keynote speakers reflected these themes and brought a wealth of local and international expertise to the conference. The program included an eclectic taste of Darwin, with a standout amazing yet informative field trip to Crocosaurus Cove. All of the presented lectures were of a high standard and the organisation of the program was flawless.

There was a split program, with each session catering for different needs and education levels. Emergency trainees and registrars were provided with the opportunity to present papers that they have published in their particular area of interest. These talks were worthwhile and very informative. It was a meaningful insight into the life and work of a doctor in the emergency department, which as only a third year medical student I have not had the chance to encounter often. It was also interesting to note the experiences of staff at the Royal Darwin Hospital, which being in a capital city, caters for a large catchment area, yet it still functions similarly to a rural hospital.

One particularly interesting session was a discussion regarding the Northern Territory Aboriginal Intervention and its impact on Indigenous health. Both positives and negatives were of the intervention were explored and the panel fielded a barrage of questions. They also provided opinions on the implementation of the intervention thus far and the future directions in Indigenous health policy in the Northern Territory. The consensus was that there seems to have been some progress already made in their long-sighted aim to ‘close the gap’. The panel’s obvious interest in reversing the psychosocial determinants of Indigenous people was inspiring and exceptional.

An interesting and controversial presentation was performed by Jeffrey Ho from the United States. He presented a paper designed to assess the ‘introduction of the conducted electrical weapon into a hospital setting’. This talk discussed the potential for the use of the Taser x26 weapon, currently used by police to control violent and enraged persons, in the emergency setting. The results of this session indicated that Tasers may be effective for use in emergency departments as they proved to control the escalation of violent situations that may injure hospital employees, and even aborted one patient suicide attempt.

The venue for the 2009 ACEM Winter Symposium was the Holiday Inn Esplanade and this venue was easily accessible being close to the hub of the very happening city centre. The social program was also memorable, with symposium opening drinks at the Northern Territory Parliament House overlooking the harbour and a visit to the famous and beautiful Mindil Beach Markets. The conference dinner held at Pee Wees on the Point, one of Darwin’s finest restaurants, was definitely the social highlight for me, with fine wine and
dining complemented by the superb views of the sunset over Fannie Bay. At the function I was able to meet not only like-minded students but also many emergency physicians and training registrars.

While I am from a rural background, attend a Rural Clinical School and have completed my rural rotation placement I still feel that there is a substantial amount to learn and experience in the rural setting. By attending this conference I have widened my views on rural health and enhanced my knowledge of emergency medicine. In particular, I have furthered my insight into health care provision for Indigenous Australians whilst being provided with a unique and extremely valuable educational and cultural experience. By attending this conference I have gained a taste of what to expect when I am to live in a similar locality in the future.

The ACEM Winter Symposium provided a fascinating and challenging scientific program together with an opportunity to see the best of what the Northern Territory has to offer. It was a wonderful opportunity to attend and this conference gave me the insight that I required to learn more about health provision in rural and remote communities. Darwin – I’ll be back!

Thank you RAMUS

Lauren Quinn
Belinda Gowen

Australasian College of Emergency Medicine Winter Symposium, Darwin 24-26 June 2009

I was convinced the taxi driver was wrong. I had not slept all night, just spent 5 hours on a plane and had never been to Darwin before, but I was definitely correct while Macca, (my trusty taxi driver who, I found out later, had lived all his life in Darwin), was wrong. He claimed to have dropped me off at my hotel, which was advertised as being in the heart of Darwin’s CBD, but my sleep deprived, city-corrupted brain was certain that we couldn’t possibly be in the CBD; the outer suburbs maybe, but the CBD?? After a few moments of gathering my wits and repeated assurances from Macca (), my frazzled brain admitted defeat and accepted that this sprawling hotel on what could only be described as a boulevard overlooking a palm-tree fringed beach was in fact the center of the capital of the ‘Top-End.’

Sunset over Mindi Beach

Darwin’s tourism website describes it ‘a place of sunshine, beaches and hectic nightlife’. And it is so true! For anyone who hasn’t been to Darwin, I strongly, strongly recommend it! I liked it so much I’m now planning on moving up there after my intern year next year (which I am trying not to think about as I am currently enjoying my last holidays as a student – eek!) After coming from cold, wet, rainy Melbourne balmy, sunny, warm Darwin was like paradise. The air has that sweet, salty summer smell and it feels like it should be holidays, but alas, the academic start of the program was due to start at 8am so I reluctantly bid the sunshine farewell.

However, the academic content of the conference was great! The focus of the conference was on tropical, rural and disaster response medicine – three areas in which I have a particular interest. It was a unique privilege to be able to listen to experts in the fields of toxicology, neurosurgery, burns management and septic shock discuss the latest developments in these areas, and then be able to meet the experts during lunch (or over drinks) and discuss the impact of their research and any questions I may have had.

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The academic component of the conference also incorporated several panel type discussions and I was extremely impressed by interest the medical staff present displayed in continuing their further education and improving the structure of the medical system. The response to the Ashmore Reef Disaster was the topic of one of these discussions and I was very impressed how keen the Emergency Physicians community was to learn from the success and failures of the response that was implemented. In addition, the type of medicine that involves response to large scale disasters is something I find fascinating and therefore was inspired by the medical intervention employed by those who responded.

Overall the conference exceeded my expectations, both academically and professionally. I learnt things about toxicology and parasitological that I never knew existed and met inspiring, passionate people, who I look forward to working with in the future. I can’t wait to get back to the Top-End and experience the practice of a unique type of medicine that I got a glimpse of during the conference.

Thank you to the Ramus team for making it possible for attending this conference. I truly appreciate it and believe it has made a great impact on my career direction in the future.