

# Avant and Interplast Student Placement Program 2019

An experience of a lifetime

MAJOR OPERATING THEATRES



**Charlie Jeong**  
2018 Avant and Interplast Student Placement Program recipient

**A severed hand, shark bite, burns and cleft palates, these just are some of the injuries and congenital conditions that Charlie Jeong witnessed first-hand during his time with the Interplast volunteer surgical team.**

Charlie, a medical student from the University of Newcastle was the lucky recipient of the 2018 Avant and Interplast Student Placement program. In March 2019 he travelled to Fiji to observe the life changing work of the Interplast team.

This is Charlie's diary of his experiences.

## Day one Saturday 2 March



*Interplast team at Labasa airport after we landed*

Early start for me, I had to get up at 3am to catch my flight. It was a long drive to Sydney, but I was excited to meet some of the team at the airport and fly to Nadi, Fiji. After a 4.5 hour flight, we arrived and I was immediately hit by the hot and humid weather. It was my first time to Fiji and I wasn't expecting this at all! We were met by the other five team members, who had flown in from Melbourne and Brisbane.

We headed straight to our resort where we unloaded our bags and relaxed for a couple of hours before dinner. We got to know each other throughout the day, and it was so nice to find I was part of such a warm and welcoming team. I was very much looking forward to working with them.

## Day two Sunday 3 March



*Me and the Interplast team with our main local contact and surgeon Maloni*



*Interplast equipment in Nadi - checking in for Labasa bound flight*



*Anaesthetists - David and Philippa unpacking the Interplast equipment*

In the morning we made way our back to the airport to fly to Labasa, where we were going to work for the rest of our time in Fiji. I was shocked by the sheer amount of equipment and supplies we had brought from Australia! There were more than 10 large boxes to transport to Labasa and then back to Australia.

After the short flight we arrived in Labasa and were greeted by our main local contact and surgeon, Maloni. On the way to our accommodation, it started pouring with rain and I was stunned by how quickly it came and went.

After lunch we headed off to Labasa Hospital to unpack the gear and prepare for the week ahead. We had to check all the supplies and equipment thoroughly to ensure nothing was missing.

## Day three Monday 4 March



*Me with the Interplast team in front of Labasa Hospital*

### First official day at the hospital!

We got up early and headed off to the hospital in a van provided by the Fijian Ministry of Health. I was excited to finally start my placement after two days of traveling and organising.

We were welcomed by the hospital staff and introduced ourselves to the local surgeons and trainees who we'd be working with. Our team headed straight to the clinic because there was no time to waste. As we walked past the waiting room I saw approximately 40-50 patients waiting and we only had half a day to see them!

The purpose of the clinic was to figure out which of the patients were suitable for surgery and prioritising them in order of urgency. It was both an enriching and touching experience, as I heard stories from people from all walks of life. There was a farmer who injured his hand in a work accident and is desperate to get back to work, a fisherman who was bitten by a shark and can no longer move his dominant arm or hand properly, and a child born with a cleft palate whose parents are worried about their future. Some of the patients had travelled for hours by bus for a chance to change their lives.



*Me in front of the major operating theatres*



*Photo with Maloni - local head surgeon*



*Surgery on a burns patient*

Despite the language barrier I could still see the expression of joy, mixed with nervousness, as patients thought of the prospect of life changing surgery. But it was heartbreaking to see the disappointment in their faces on some of the patients when our plastic surgeons informed them that surgery would not improve anything.

After a quick lunch break, it was time to get to work. The big operation for the afternoon was a patient with significant burns on his right leg, left arm and upper chest area. The surgery required grafting of healthy skin from the left leg and using that skin to replace the skin on burnt areas. It was my first time observing this kind of surgery and was fascinating to watch. It took longer than it would in Australia, due to the lack of advanced medical equipment that we take for granted.

I met a two year old girl called Adisamu who had a bilateral cleft lip and was due to have the surgery today. I got to know her and her mother Sereima, who travelled four hours by bus for the operation. She fortunately didn't have too much trouble with her feeding like other children with

## Day four Tuesday 5 March



*Visiting Adisamu after her surgery*



*Adisamu and her mother Sereima before the cleft lip repair surgery*



*Adisamu after the cleft lip repair surgery*

the same condition, but Sereima was very concerned about Adisamu's future. Although her family (including her nine siblings), neighbours and Christian community are very supportive—having a facial deformity could lead to bullying in school, her speech may not develop properly and she could have trouble finding a spouse later in life, which is very important in Adisamu's community.

I was fortunate enough to observe the cleft lip repair surgery. It was amazing because, even though it seemed like a complicated surgery, it all came together to produce a wonderful result.

Seeing Sereima so happy and thankful to the Interplast team made my day, and this in itself was worth my trip with Interplast.

## Day five Wednesday 6 March



*Hand trauma operation*

There had been a huge change to the theatre schedule because of a trauma patient that came in late last night. The patient had a complete cut in his left palm, starting from his little finger all the way to the start of his index finger. His palm essentially was cut in two and dangling from one end to another but by some miracle, blood was still getting to all his fingers and reconstructive surgery could be performed.

I couldn't include the 'before' photo because of its gruesome nature, but the 'after' photo demonstrates how well the surgery went.

I got to know Rishaal, the local surgical trainee who assisted in this operation, quite well. I was delighted to hear from him that the Interplast team had such a positive impact in the improvement in quality of care in Labasa. Though, our team leader and plastic surgeon, David Ying, says that Interplast's contribution is very small and the majority of the credit goes to the continued efforts of the local surgeons seeking to further advance their practice.



*Rishaal, a local surgical trainee*



*After surgery photo of hand trauma patient*



*Last night – dinner with the team and Maloni*

Tonight is my last night and Maloni, along with other hospital staff, kindly cooked the team some local food. I was sad to leave, but it was great to share my last night with the team and the trainees, who I became close with over the past few days.

## Day six Thursday 7 March



*The railroad track across the river, which is used for transporting sugar cane*

As it was my last day, I woke up a little earlier to explore the town before I left. I walked down a small railroad track that crossed the river. It was a mesmerising sight as I saw the reflection of the landscape on the absolutely still river with the sun rising over the other side. It's such a beautiful part of the world and I wished I could have stayed till the end of the week with the team, but unfortunately my time here had come to an end.

I said my final goodbyes to the rest of the team and headed off to the airport for my flight home.

My trip was a short but an inspirational one. I saw first-hand the impact the Australian trained doctors and allied health professionals can have in an area like Labasa. They were not only able to improve the physical and mental well-being of patients, but also pass on different skill sets to the local surgeons and trainees.

I am still uncertain which career path in medicine I will choose, but the Avant and Interplast Student Placement program has opened my eyes to the differing, yet definite needs in less privileged parts of the world and how I can make a difference. "Repairing bodies and rebuilding lives" is Interplast's official slogan and this placement has allowed me to see this in action. It will be an experience that I will cherish for a very long time.

## LABASA HOSPITAL

THE NEW WING WAS OFFICIALLY OPENED BY  
THE INTERIM PRIME MINISTER

COMMODORE JOSAIJA VOREDE BAINIMARAMA, OSt.J, MS

ON FRIDAY 20<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2009

FIRE  
HYDRANT  
VALVE



**“The Avant and Interplast Student Placement program has opened my eyes to the differing, yet definite needs in less privileged parts of the world and how I can make a difference.”**

**Charlie Jeong**

2018 Avant and Interplast Student Placement Program recipient

# Avant and Interplast

## helping rebuild lives

---

Each year Interplast sends teams of plastic and reconstructive surgeons, anaesthetists, nurses and allied health professionals to provide free reconstructive surgery and medical training to communities in need in Asia-Pacific. Through the Avant and Interplast Student Placement program one medical student member is fortunate to travel with the team to witness first-hand the life-changing work of the dedicated volunteer of medical professionals.

### More information

Visit [avant.org.au/interplast](http://avant.org.au/interplast) or look out for updates in the Avant Student Newsletter

**The full terms and conditions for the scholarship program are available at [avant.org.au/interplast](http://avant.org.au/interplast)**

IMPORTANT: Professional indemnity insurance products are issued by Avant Insurance Limited, ABN 82 003 707 471, AFSL 238 765. The information provided here is general advice only. You should consider the appropriateness of the advice having regard to your own objectives, financial situation and needs before deciding to purchase or continuing to hold a policy with us. For full details including the terms, conditions, and exclusions that apply, please read and consider the policy wording and PDS, which is available at [avant.org.au](http://avant.org.au) or by contacting us on 1800 128 268. 2247.5 05/18 (1021)

