I spent my six-week elective in the most northerly and remote inhabited island group in the British Isles: the Shetland Islands. An archipelago of around a hundred islands, they are found in the Atlantic Ocean, about 130 miles north of mainland Scotland and are home to around 23,000 people. I was based in the anaesthetic department of the only hospital in the islands - the Gilbert Bain Hospital in Lerwick, the main town in Shetland.

The majority of my time was spent in theatres for elective lists, which ranged from adult general surgery to paediatric otorhinolaryngology, with exposure to a corresponding array of anaesthetic techniques. I also joined the anaesthetists for emergency cases or to attend medical emergencies throughout the hospital.

In theatres there were ample opportunities to develop new practical skills, and to practise existing ones. I gained a great deal of experience in airway management, ranging from basic airway manoeuvres and face mask ventilation to supraglottic airway and endotracheal tube insertion. I was also able to learn new skills, including nasal intubation, videolaryngoscopy and central nerve blocks.

I gained an insight into the subspecialty of pain medicine by attending chronic pain clinics and invasive pain lists. My involvement over the course of the attachment progressed from observing and assisting to being able to perform a variety of nerve blocks under senior guidance. These included facet joint and sacroiliac joint injections, caudal epidurals and ganglion impar block.

During my time in Shetland, I was involved with two patients requiring transfer to the mainland, which highlighted the difficulties of managing critically unwell patients in such a remote location with no specialists on site. The challenges are compounded by the relatively small number of critically ill patients, especially children, seen per year in Shetland, meaning that opportunities to gain experience and keep skills up to date are limited.

I also participated in training sessions led by the Scottish Emergency Medical Retrieval Service, which was an excellent way to further my knowledge of transfer medicine. I was also able to learn about delivering simulation sessions by operating SimMan for the simulation-based components of the training.
Teaching, both formal and informal, covered a wide variety of topics, from revision of relevant physiology and pharmacology, to practical topics such as FAST (Focused Assessment with Sonography in Trauma) scanning. I was also invited to participate in the anaesthetic department’s clinical governance meeting at which I gave a presentation on intraosseous vascular access, as well as leading a practical skills session.

I also had the opportunity to learn about medicine outside the hospital environment. The anaesthetic department work closely with Shetland Coastguard to provide medical training to the Coastguard paramedics who are first responders in any search and rescue situation. I spent some time at the helicopter airbase in Sumburgh learning about the pre-hospital management of patients following search and rescue operations. I was also fortunate enough to be able to join the helicopter crew on exercise and participate in simulated training scenarios.

Overall, my elective in Shetland was a very varied and interesting experience, providing me with insights into remote and rural healthcare within the UK, thus widely contrasting with my undergraduate experience in London. I have been able to practise a wide variety of practical skills, as well as acquire new ones, and gain an appreciation of the challenges of managing critically unwell patients in a remote location. As a member of the anaesthetic team, I was involved in numerous aspects of perioperative care, which has furthered my understanding of anaesthesia and deepened my interest in pursuing the specialty as a career.

I am grateful to the AAGBI for its generous funding towards my elective. I would also like to thank Dr Jack Swierczewski, Dr Brodyn Poulton and Dr Catriona Barr for making my elective so memorable and allowing me to gain so much practical experience, as well as actively encouraging me to explore the stunning natural beauty of the Shetland Islands.