

Malta 2016 - Expeditions Fund Report

In the summer of 2016 I travelled to Malta for 4 weeks as part of a medical student exchange programme organised through the IFMSA (International Federation of Medical Schools Association). I spent this time as part of the Orthopaedic team on the main islands Mater Dei Hospital. This was a great experience both on a personal level to visit a country steeped in such history and also in a professional capacity to further my medical education. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Expeditions Fund for helping towards funding this trip and opportunity, for which I am very grateful.

With only a 4 week break between finishing my end of year medical exams and beginning my final year of study, I was on the plane less than 48 hours after finishing my last exam. Needless to say this gave me very little time to pack, let alone think about my trip and upcoming placement in too much detail! I was excited however for my first experience of the medical profession outside of the UK and the different challenges, views and perspectives of healthcare this would bring to myself as well as the opportunity to explore such a historic country. In keeping with my hectic schedule I was in the hospital less than 12 hours after arriving in Malta to begin my placement!

I was assigned to Consultant who specialised in shoulder pathologies whom I spent the majority of my time with in addition to his immediate team. Each morning all of the hospital's Orthopaedic teams would meet at 7.30am where the trauma cases for the day ahead were discussed and prioritised for surgical procedures that day and management options discussed and agreed upon for these patients. Senior registrars and consultants also used this as a teaching opportunity for the more junior doctors and students which was a valuable learning opportunity for myself each day. I spent my time between attending clinics with my consultant, his elective theatre lists and also the trauma theatres. These afforded me a variety of learning opportunities and I was often actively involved in the clinics and also regularly scrubbed in during surgical procedures. The team were very welcoming and not only taught me a great deal of medical knowledge they passed on their experiences within the medical profession and advice for the future which I hope will stand me in good stead for my career. Spending an extended time on a specialist placement of personal interest such as this for a 4-week period is something we rarely get the opportunity to carry out for the duration of our medical degree. Therefore, being directly involved in surgical procedures, daily meetings and one-to-one teaching in one specific area of orthopaedics enabled me to develop a depth of knowledge I have rarely had the time or opportunity to do so throughout my time at medical school.



Mater Dei Hospital. Msida

Aside from developing my medical knowledge in this field it was also interesting to observe both the similarities and differences between the Maltese and British Healthcare systems. I was aware before my trip of how highly Malta is rated for its standard of Medical care, being ranked as the 5th best in the world according to the World Health Organisation (compared to the UK as the 18th). I was surprised how similar the structures of hospital with regards to its layout and organisation of medical and surgical teams was to that in the UK. Like the UK, Malta has a healthcare system free at the point of delivery, being funded by public taxation and National Insurance contributions. I learnt that despite this, it has a thriving private sector which is opted for by many Maltese Citizens therefore taking much of the pressure away from the public sector, resulting in the public sector remaining widely accessible (one of the main reasons for being so highly ranked as a healthcare system). Mater Dei Hospital was also recently built in 2007 and is one of the biggest in Europe, supplying the vast majority of the Maltese population which is just under 500,000. This economy of scale was widely seen as being key in delivering successful and cost efficient healthcare due to the economic and logistical benefits of delivering care from one central location. I found these aspects of the healthcare system fascinating at a time when our own healthcare system is coming under such pressure to deliver better healthcare which is more accessible and cost efficient.



Mdina, Medieval Capital of Malta



Valletta, Capital City of Malta

Another interesting aspect in the hospital was the use of the Maltese language. Despite Maltese being the official language of Malta, around 90% of the population speak fluent English and the hospital itself is officially an English speaking hospital; a reflection of the array of countries from which the healthcare staff in the hospital originate. Despite this a number of consultations took part in Maltese which was at times challenging to understand large parts of consultations. I took this as an opportunity to begin to learn some of the language and by the end of the month I could convince myself I had picked some of it up. The Maltese language interestingly consists of an array of Arabic, Italian, French

and English, making some words easy enough to pick up! The language was evidently of great historical and cultural importance to the people of Malta as it is the only place in the world the language is spoken and is key to their identity.

Away from the hospital I had plenty of time to explore some Malta's rich culture and history as well as having time to relax on the beach! Learning about Malta's role in both World War I&II was particularly interesting. I was fascinated to learn Malta was both a strategic base for the Royal Navy's ships to move between Europe and Africa as well as accommodating a large number of wounded soldiers leading to it becoming known as the nurse of the Mediterranean during the First World War. Amongst other things I was able to visit the smaller more rural island of Gozo which offered amazing scenery including the azure window and the medieval town of Mdina. It was a great experience to share some of these experiences with medical students from all across Europe as part of the IFMSA exchange. Meeting and making good friends with students from a huge diversity of backgrounds was a particular highlight of the trip and an experience I was lucky to have.



Azure Window, Gozo

As an individual I am always looking to challenge myself and seek ways to ensure I continue to develop not only professionally and academically but also as an individual. Travelling abroad this summer to Malta to undertake a clinical hospital placement enabled me to achieve just that. Broadening my medical knowledge in the field of orthopaedics as well as experiencing a different healthcare system to that of UK, albeit similar, was a great experience. Being placed in a different medical environment to that of the UK posed me different challenges but also enabled me to adapt and develop my communication and team working skills. Hopefully these skills I will be able to continue to develop and ultimately implement in years to come in my medical practice to enable me to become a better doctor. Also the opportunity to meet people and make friends from medical schools all around Europe was a brilliant experience.

As a medical student long terms and intense periods of study mean that at this stage of my education it is difficult to undertake paid work to help fund travel such as this. Therefore, I am very grateful for the financial support provided by the Expedition Fund to enable me to have undertaken this trip.