IFMSA EXCHANGE PROGRAM, BRAGA PORTUGAL

I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to take part in a medical student exchange in the summer of 2017, especially since Barts and the London medical school is one of the few universities in the UK that participate. The IFMSA (International Federation of Medical Students’ Association) has been creating exchange programs for medical students for around 50 years - connecting students from around the world and creating unforgettable experiences! With 127 countries taking part and over 13,000 students embarking on exchange each year, it was a fantastic opportunity. I’m also incredibly thankful for the Queen Mary Expeditions Fund. The exchange did add up to quite a bit of money and although it was an absolutely priceless experience, the fund truly helped in securing the trip for me.

Having heard from previous students who went on exchange how amazing their four weeks was, I had high expectations for my trip and I wasn’t disappointed. I spent 4 weeks in a city called Braga in north Portugal. During the day, I’d spend my time in the plastic surgery operating theatres along with three other medical students, one from Iceland, the other from Brazil and the third from Poland. I got to scrub in on quite a few
occasions which was amazing! The doctors and nurses in the hospital were extremely kind to us and although most were not confident speaking English, they included us in almost everything they did. A few mornings were spent in consultation clinics and on the ward although these visits weren’t as useful as all the discussion was done in Portuguese and had to be later translated to us by the doctor.

The hospital in Braga is a new one with state of the art equipment and operating theatres so it was a great environment to be in. Over the four weeks, we got to witness a wide range of operations from hand surgery to breast reconstruction to removal of facial carcinomas, making each day exciting and interesting.

Apart from plastic surgery, we had the opportunity to spend a day in the accident and emergency unit. It was interesting to see how the emergency department in Braga was organised and triaged. Getting an insight into another country’s health system was intuitive. I was able to consider what worked well in the Portuguese health system and if it could be applied to our NHS.

As for the social aspect of things, the exchange in Portugal could not have been more amazing! We had something planned for us almost every single evening. Local medical students would spend their summer taking us around Braga as well as various beaches, cities, markets and treks around north Portugal. Our exchange group went kayaking in Ponta de Lima, on a gondola ride in Aveiro, took a surfing lesson in Espinho, went canyoning down
waterfalls in Gerês National Park, shopped for souveniers at the famous market in Barcelos and visited the castle of Guimarães. On top of that we met other groups of exchange students during national social weekends in Porto and Lisbon. We got a special tour of the port wine cellars in Porto and the monastery in Lisbon as well as walking tours through both the cities. Whilst I loved Lisbon and Porto, staying in a smaller city in the north really gave me an insight into Portuguese culture. We tried some fabulous local dishes such as francesinha, bacalhau (codfish) and the famous pastel de nata or Portuguese custard tarts.

These social events allowed me to really connect with the other students. We’d all discuss (without breeching confidentiality, of course) about patients we’d seen in our home countries, what health systems and hospital conditions were like as well as what the structure of medical school was. I felt like I was learning so much outside the hospital as well. Of course, medic talk aside, I really did bond with everyone on a personal level as well.

Meeting such a diverse group of medical students truly offers you a global perspective of healthcare. But what was really special was just being in such a diverse group of personalities and yet gelling together so well. It felt like we were all one big community, sharing the same struggles whilst working our way through medical school and through life.