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Elective Experience - Summer Erasmus Madrid 2022

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In the blink of an eye I was on my flight home, wondering how two months, which felt like two years, could pass as quickly as two weeks. During the summer of 2022 I was lucky enough to be one of the three DEM3/GEM2 students to participate in an erasmus exchange in Madrid, Spain. This was the first year this programme was launched and I was one very happy 'guinea pig'. There's not a day that goes by where I don't wish I could be back in La Latina, in the heart of Madrid, basking in the scorching heat. Although, on that note, the scorching heat I could do without...

Madrid is the bustling capital of Spain with a population of 3.2 million. That summer it gained 20+ Erasmus students from all over the world who came for clinical electives at Hospital Fundacion Jimenez Diaz, which happens to be the best hospital in all of Spain. The unlucky few (among which we include ourselves) were only there for two months, while others had the privilege of being there for 6 months to a year. You'll find medical schools around Europe aren't as accepting of other universities elective programs and curriculum, that's why our exchanges are so short lived. However the beautiful unspoken rule of knowing your time is limited, is that everyone is generous with their friendship and their time. You take nothing for granted and make the most of every day. A simple hello outside the lockers turns into exchanging life stories over lunch and being friends for 10+ years by dinner, sipping tinto, sharing tapas and laughing a little too loudly over inside jokes in Span-glish.

My first rotation was paediatrics and I got to experience paeds emergencies, inpatient ward rounds, outpatient clinics and neonates. Dermatology was my second rotation which included out-patient clinics and minor-procedure surgeries. A day in the life included strolling through the streets of La Latina at 7:30am, coffee in hand and praying the 14 degrees weather will last as long as possible. From there you'd cross La Plaza Mayor and catch the metro at Plaza del Sol to Moncloa and wonder how is it possible for a public transport system to be ever-so punctual? Hospital placement was from 8am to 3pm and it depended on your specific rotation schedule and sometimes included hands-on tutorials on suturing and microscope assisted anastomosis creation with the other erasmus students.

The first two weeks of my elective felt like being in the front row at Wimbledon, only a little less glamorous. Your head snapping left and right trying to keep up with conversations, processing what was previously said, only to anticipate the next response, between doctor and patient. There's something very special about hitting the two-week language-barrier watershed. That's when all of a sudden, your brain magically adjusts to the speed of conversation and you understand without needing to feed the constant feedback loop of translation. By the third week you're confident to ask questions and respond, in as best an accent that you can muster. By the fourth week you feel like a local, using colloquialisms and speaking to the pace of the latest reggaeton single.

During my paediatric placement I was incredibly impressed to see how quickly patients got triaged and managed through paediatric emergencies and how smoothly the work flowed. This was mostly thanks to paediatric emergency departments being separate to general a&e and also the digital medical platform used by the hospital. On this platform doctors and parents/patients could have access to the patient's file including medical history, their prescriptions, past/future appointments and scans. My favourite aspect of paediatrics was assisting in paediatric allergy clinics where children would be given management plans in accordance to their allergies. Regarding children with food allergies, micro-doses of the allergen would be introduced in their diet to help the child build tolerance to the substance over time (6m - 1 year). For children with pollen related allergies, they were prescribed either oral medications daily, or IM injections to be done at home, to help the child build their tolerance to allergens from September - March to not have bad flare ups during the spring and summer season. Dermatology for me was the creme de la creme, excuse my French. I got to assist in dermatology clinics, I sat in on lectures and MDTs. Most importantly I got to help with minor surgical procedures such as SCC and BCC removals and suturing.

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The Spanish healthcare system was quite different to the Irish healthcare system in that doctors are allocated their medical specialties after finishing their final year medical exam (MIR). We are very fortunate in Ireland to be able to pursue whatever training scheme we desire by working in the field and gaining experience. Training schemes in Spain last on average four years after which doctors can pursue fellowships and PhDs. The regular work schedule for doctors is 8am - 3pm except for those who are on call, and the frequency of on call depends on your speciality of choice. The role of doctors also is different and only includes consulting patients and performing physical exams. All other tasks such as phlebotomy, cannula and catheter insertion are performed by nursing staff. I think it's better for doctors to have the skills to perform all tasks, however I understand why in Spain they allocate jobs differently. All in all - I've yet to think of any negative traits of the Spanish healthcare system. It's a system which flows seamlessly for optimal patient treatment and comfort, within the healthy, work-life balanced-based capabilities of the medics and staff, and it therefore supports a happy and healthy community.

Thanks to my experience I've met so many amazing future medics and Spanish medical professionals that I keep in touch with to this day and hope to continue doing so.

I count down the days to becoming qualified so I can return even for a short while and embrace the culture and the medical work in Spain, once again.