

Neurology

Hospital Mateu Orfila, Mahon, Menorca, Islas Baleares

Objectives

1. Describe the pattern of disease on the small island population
2. Compare the health provision in Menorca with that of the NHS in the UK
3. Gain an appreciation of the impact that the new hospital has had on the population
4. As the only medical students in the hospital, develop confidence in autonomy.

I undertook my medical elective at Hospital Mateu Orfila, a new hospital in Mahon in Menorca of the Balearic Islands, which opened 5 years ago. It has a catchment area of approximately 80,000-100,000 people and contains 150 inpatient beds, outpatient services, a surgical and anaesthetic unit, intensive care unit and accident and emergency services. The hospital has close ties with larger centres in both Palma Mallorca and Barcelona for any necessary patient transfers; as well as for sharing workload of laboratory and radiology services.

Before I arrived on the island I had absolutely no idea about the incidence and prevalence of disease on the island; however with the popular notion of the 'Mediterranean Diet' and the strong cultural, family and religious values of the people; I had expected a much healthier population than the one I left behind in London. I was surprised then, to find that rates of both obesity, diabetes, hypertension and heart disease (arguably good markers of general health) are much higher on this island in comparison with the rest of Spain, though still understandably lower than the UK. A possible reason for this is the abolition of the 'Mediterranean Diet' with the Westernisation of the island; which could perhaps be linked with the post-Franco commercialisation of the Balearic Islands and the rest of Spain for tourism, though I would like to note that the island of Menorca is relatively untouched for the most part, in comparison to the larger Mallorca.

Another possible reason for these higher rates of disease could be in the demographic of the island. Being a small island, with no university and relatively lower opportunities for young people in comparison to other Spanish-speaking areas of the world, the changing demographic of the country between the 1980's to the year 2000 suggests that more young (and possibly healthy) individuals are leaving the island, and infact there has been a significant decline in the number of young people on the island between 1981 and 2001, with an increase in the elderly population of the island. The island has also seen a large increase almost yearly in migration. Thus, it is possible that the increase in average age of an islander is contributing to the increased rates of disease.

Medical Elective - 2013

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Working mostly in the busy Neurology department of the hospital, I was able to gain a glimpse into the epidemiology of Neurological conditions on the island. I was fascinated to speak to the most senior of the Neurologists on the island, who told me that she was the first Neurologist to come to Menorca in 1981 – so she had a population of around 80,000 – very few of which had been given a neurological diagnosis before! I was quite surprised to find that once diagnoses were made, there is a very wide range of both common and rare neurological diseases present on the island, and I feel that this would be a very interesting place to be a neurologist! Since the arrival of the first neurologist, the department has expanded and epidemiology studies curiously show that rates of diseases such as Multiple Sclerosis and Motor Neurone Disease are the highest in Spain. It is difficult to explain a reason for this, but it is possible that this is because the link between primary and secondary health services on the island is very strong, so it is possible that this small Island is picking up the diagnoses of much more patients than in a larger area such as Barcelona or Madrid.

The health provision on the island is absolutely fantastic. The new hospital is very well equipped with state of the art technology, and with the relatively small patient population, it is possible to have access to tests and treatments with vastly reduced waiting times in comparison with the UK. In Neurology in particular I have noticed the standardized use of treatments that in the UK would be regarded as very advanced and specialist. It has even been known that a patient could go to a GP and get a same-day referral with a consultant at an out-patients clinic – something that is completely unheard of in the UK! This surprised me somewhat, as in the current economical climate I had envisaged the larger organisation of the NHS to be superior in healthcare provision.

The hospital has very intimate links with larger centres such as Barcelona and Palma Mallorca, and being situated very close to the International Airport, as well as having a helipad – patient transfers both in and out of Menorca are simple and frequent, and I have noted good cooperation between different departments in the different centres.

One thing I have noticed in the hospital is the apparent over-staffing and under-filling of beds. The hospital at times appears very quiet, a world away from The Royal London Hospital! I asked a resident doctor at the hospital, who explained that the population of the island can almost double during a busy summer season and for that reason much reserve, is needed to cope with this boon in population density. I find this fascinating as it is not something I have ever come across in rainy England!

When I arrived at the hospital I was placed in the department of Trauma and Orthopaedics, for which I spent most of my first week. However, I have a strong interest (and degree background) in the Neurosciences, and it didn't take long before I had switched over to spend time with the Neurology department. I managed to organize and foresee this myself, and therefore I feel I have demonstrated initiative and interest in a chosen topic. I was lucky to spend time with the Neurology department; as they were absolutely fantastic with me. On my first day I explained that my Spanish was mediocre at best, and the whole time I spent with them they attempted to speak in English for my benefit – even in clinical meetings that I presume must have taken twice as long because of me! I was also invited to take examinations and especially speak to the English speaking patients of the island (of which there are many!) and I was lucky enough to be made to feel part of the team, even for the short while I spent with them. I

Medical Elective - 2013

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also took the initiative to spend time doing neurological Doppler ultrasound scans, and managed to organize spending time with the electrophysiology department – and in doing so I was able to gain knowledge practical experience to the theoretical knowledge I gained in medical school.

As previously mentioned, my Spanish is fairly poor. I did infact study Spanish for 5 years at school – but this was many years ago now, and my once almost proficient grasp of the language had dissipated greatly. However; I could feel that as I progressed with my placement, just being around the language has allowed me to relearn and remember things I thought long gone in my memory, and by the end of the placement I was able to follow most consultations, even when spoken quickly.

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