

# Reflective Elective report

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**Subject:** NEUROSURGERY (Cyprus) & EMERGENCY MEDICINE (Cuba)

## Was it what you expected?

I have had previous clinical experience in Cyprus as it is my home country. I was aware how public hospitals work and the differences with the private sector. However, I did not have any experience in a specialised sector of Neurosurgery, a career which I may pursue. Having spent 5 weeks at Queens Hospital BHR in Neurosurgery I was not expecting to have a similar experience. To my surprise there were many similarities. It was a very specialised department with very experienced and skilled professionals. EBM was mentioned very frequently and modern surgical practises.

Attending the Emergency Department in a big Hospital in Cuba was an amazing experience. I was not expecting the placement to be as organised as it was. We had an assigned Consultant speaking English fluently and was very engaging. We lived very near the Hospital which also helped a lot and people in our accommodation and all the staff were very helpful, pleasant and welcoming.

## Clinical Experience

I was not expecting to get out much of such a short placement which is much specialised. However, I was participating actively in Clinical Duties as in the UK with morning ward rounds, outpatient clinics, ward jobs, attendance and assistance in theatres. The Neurosurgeons were very helpful to me and I was given attention in terms of explanations, patients and even challenging questions. I had a lot of patient interaction especially in the outpatient clinics.

In Cuba, it was a very useful experience. For 3 weeks we were actively participating in assessment of patients, reviewing the notes and suggesting management plans. We were also receiving impromptu and scheduled teaching depending on the cases and reviewing of imaging. Presentations were very similar as in the UK and specifically East London. There were also quite a few presentations of intoxications and Dengue Fever.

## What did you learn about the people and the country?

As I was practising back home, I was aware of the culture and the mentality. However I was able to put in practice communication and practical skills taught in the UK, when interacting with patients. The Cypriot people are very friendly and warm and sharing that, I was able to benefit from the placement by spending a lot of time with patients practising my history taking and examination

skills. Patients show a lot of respect for Doctors and sometimes they only want someone that would just listen to them. The reason is that Medicine in Cyprus is practised in a very paternalistic way.

In Cuba the people were very warm with similar culture to mine. They were always ready to help in every way. Cuba has a different political system which has a major impact on the welfare of the people. Cubans live with much less salary and living expenses are very high for them. I was very surprised to hear that despite accommodation, education and health is provided free, they do feel very restricted.

### **What were the best bits?**

The best reward that I had was in the outpatient clinics when I was seeing patients supervised by Consultant Neurosurgeons. The clinics were very busy and a lot of patients were only seeking reassurance. The fact that patients were very happy with my consultations, made me feel proud of my self being able to put into practice existing skills. Especially communication skills and explanations to patients, as in Cyprus there is little attention given to that. Moreover I felt really happy joining the on call Neurosurgeon for the acute presentations and following the complete management of such presentations such as head injuries. I felt that I learned a lot from that as I had frequent teaching sessions during the on calls.

What I have enjoyed the most was the culture of Cubans and their warmth as people. In the hospital we were treated as part of the team and very involved. In our accommodation we felt like family members. Everyone was very willing all the time to help with anything and treated us with much respect.

### **What were bits you least enjoyed**

Despite the rewards of the outpatient clinics, I was disappointed to see that in a specialised clinic, at points it felt like a GP consultations. There were no formal referrals or any primary care therefore there were frequent presentations of mechanical/muscular back pain. At times this seemed repetitive and with such a busy clinic the Neurosurgeons had to deal with this with almost abrupt ways to carry on the clinic. I did try to be more considerate to patients presenting with pain even when a Neurosurgical opinion was not needed.

In Cuba I did not enjoy the “offerings” of Cuban “jineteros” or “hustlers” on the streets. Always there were Cubans offering services in the streets such as taxi, accommodation, cigars, restaurants etc. Sometimes it was hard to avoid them and make it clear that we were not interested. However, we never felt threatened.

### **Were there any shortcomings?**

The placement was arranged initially through Dr Christopoulos, head of Neurosurgery in Cyprus who mentioned that structured teaching was going to have taken place and perhaps a small project. However, he had to attend a conference through my two-week placement which I was not informed until last minute. For that reason I was not able to benefit from structured teaching or get involved in a project. Discussions were made with the other Neurosurgeons to attempt that but it has not taken place.

With regards to Cuba, we have taken mostly USD to exchange for Cuban Pesos, as we followed the advice of people been to Cuba. However, for USD there was a service charge of 10% in every exchange which was not the case for other currencies. It would have been slightly better to take

more GBP or Euros with us. Moreover, some soothing cream for mosquito bites would have been very useful.

### **Would you recommend it to another student?**

I got a lot out of my placement in a specialised department at my home country. I would recommend this placement to another student that is familiar with the Greek language and the Mediterranean culture so as to make the most of it. Despite that there are foreign students studying medicine in Cyprus, there is often a language barrier.

I would definitely recommend this Placement in Cuba as it was an amazing experience at the Hospital and also the people and the country.

### **Would you do anything differently?**

For this kind of placement with a lot of emergencies I would have liked to join the on-call Neurosurgeon more times. I attended one night shift which was very useful including attendance in emergency theatres. The same for Cuba I would have pursued to participate in a night shift and done more reading about Cuba beforehand e.g. "Lonely Planet Guide to Cuba". Moreover, in Cuba I would have liked to spend time in a Tertiary Hospital in Habana. I would also have made more efforts to improve my Spanish as Cubans have a difficult accent to understand.

### **What did you learn about yourself?**

I learned that my Medical School has equipped me with a lot of knowledge and skills that could be applied in a foreign Hospital setting, which I did think I would have. Also I was aware about my limitations in terms of experience. Moreover I learned that planning as much in advance as possible and reading up about a new country is very useful.

### **Where there any deviations form the risk assessment**

With regards to Cuba, due to the weather we were sunburned once and then had to avoid sun exposure for a few days.

### **How was your accommodation**

In Cyprus I lived at home. In Cuba we lived in a "Casa Particulares" which is the home of a family that rents rooms. It was an amazing experience as they would help us with anything, treat us like family and our food was included.

### **How were your travel arrangements**

In Cyprus I have travelled with plane as I have always done with a Direct flight. We travelled from London to Cuba through Madrid rather than a direct from London as it was significantly cheaper and there was very little wait at the airport. Within Cuba we used buses and taxis.

### **Other experiences and information useful to other students**

Cuba was one the best experiences I have had in my life and I would recommend it to anyone. A good level of Spanish is very important and should be pursued beforehand. I would also recommend reading about Cuba and its political system. Taking printed medical material to give is much appreciated e.g. Oxford Handbook, NICE Guidelines.