

Medical Elective - 2013

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Hospital Mateu Orfila, Mahon, Menorca, Islas Baleares

1. Describe the pattern of disease on this 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 at the hospital, develop our confidence in working autonomously.

Hospital Mateu Orfila is the new hospital on the island of Minorca. It provides healthcare for the 100,000 or so residents of Menorca, as well as the fluctuating number of tourists in the summer – many of whom are from England.

Being one of the Balearic Islands, there is a general Mediterranean diet on Menorca, but with the influx of westernised tourists the diet has altered slightly. This makes for a changing population, with a lower rate of obesity, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes, when compared with the UK, but with a trend towards that of other westernised countries, and significantly higher rates than the rest of Spain (see CORSAIB Study). My consultant Dr Alberto Gil is in the process of setting up the islands first bariatric surgery unit, although he plans for most of his patients to come from the UK.

In my stay I have noticed that there seem to be a large number of squamous cell carcinoma patients, which I am told has a high prevalence on the island due to the sunny weather. I also saw a large number of sebaceous cysts, although could not find any data to suggest the incidence is higher in the Hispanic population.

The varying population in Menorca means that the demand for beds and staffing demand is variable throughout the year. Whilst on our stay here we noticed that there were many free beds, and that there were around 4 or 5 nurses allocated to a ward containing around 10 patients. This is a large difference to healthcare in the UK, where there may be one nurse for 6 patients on a surgical ward.

Whilst in an outpatient clinic I was told that if a patient comes in with a problem, they can have an appointment with a consultant the same day, which again is very different to the multiple-month long waiting lists of the NHS.

However, we have been at the hospital during the off season, and the population increases greatly with the influx of tourists, putting more strain on the hospital, it must therefore have a large reserve capacity for when the number of patients greatly increases.

The equipment in Hospital Mateu Orfila is (as expected of a new hospital) all very new and of high quality. Most equipment is the same or very similar to that which I have become familiar with in the UK. The reliance on paper is much less here than in hospitals in London, and I expect that the system in place here - using computer programmes to hold patients notes – will be adopted in the UK in the coming years. Being newly constructed and isolated on a small island I imagine it was easier to adopt a paperless system from the start, than it is for busy hospitals all over England to change.

The theatre setup is generally the same as in London, except for the scrubbing up policy which differs slightly. Of particular note is the routine use of the Bispectral Index during general anaesthesia. This

is an EEG system which sticks over the patient's forehead and links up with the display monitor to give a number from 1 to 100, with 100 being fully conscious, and less than 20 being comatose. It is designed to assist the anaesthetist in his or her judgement of the depth of anaesthesia, and prevent cases of intraoperative awareness. It is recommended under NICE guidelines, but there appears to be a great deal of controversy about its use, and whether it is required.

Whilst on the topic of controversy, it is also worth noting that the 'bare below the elbows' policy is not adopted in Menorca, and I wonder if the policy in England may change back due to the lack of clinical evidence to support it.

I have been attached to the general surgery team for my stay in Menorca, and as such have seen a wide range of surgical conditions; cholecystectomy, bowel resection, gastrectomy, haemorrhoidectomy, breast lump excision, hernia repairs, amputations, sebaceous cyst and lipoma removal, thyroidectomy, parathyroid tumor removal, the list is quite impressive. Being the main hospital for the island means that the general surgical team here deal with a far wider range of cases than any team I have spent time with in London. Their jobs are more varied, and from the perspective of a trainee, more appealing. I have always considered myself firmly headed down the medical route, with paediatrics being my top interest; however, my brief stint with the surgeons of Mateu Orfila has managed to kindle an interest in surgery that I have never had to date.

The team here is different to any I have encountered in England. They are very friendly, and are keen to share their skills, and have the time to do so. In my 6 years of medical school I assisted in theatre a handful of times, and was lucky if I were allowed to scrub up. I had never sutured in the operating room, and had sutured twice in my Accident and Emergency fortnight. The learning opportunities for surgery are vastly greater here than in the UK. Whilst on elective I have been taught how to suture using forceps, and tie knots quickly using the surgical technique. I have used diathermy and assisted in numerous procedures. I have excised a number of sebaceous cysts by myself and closed up afterwards, and even anaesthetised and amputated a necrotic toe!

The population and isolation of Minorca from the mainland is very similar to the Isle of Jersey, where I will be spending my FY1 year, so it has been very useful to see what an island hospital can be like. My stay here has given me a great deal of confidence, which will hopefully help me when I start my placement in August. It has changed my outlook on what surgery as a career may be like, and has made me more enthusiastic about my general surgical rotation as an FY1. I would highly recommend this placement to any future students. I thank all the staff I have encountered whilst here, especially those of the general surgical team.