

Monika Kondratowicz - Medical Elective: Krakow and Sydney, Summer 2018

Poland

I knew that the medical practice and technologies of the economically-growing Poland would be similar to those that I was familiar with in the UK, so my main reason for choosing this country as my first stop was to improve my language skills (I am the grand-daughter of wartime Polish immigrants so my grasp is basic). Indeed, over the four week placement I became more and more confident in my conversational abilities, and even gained quite a reasonable medical vocabulary too. Perhaps my one slip up over the placement was thinking that the Polish words for "large intestine" meant "grossly obese" for a solid week. On reading the surgical list each morning I couldn't understand why the gastric surgeons had such a plethora of obese patients!

I was attached to oncological surgery, so each day was attached to theatres, and I was given free rein of each of the rooms, moving between different ones to observe the different sub-specialities. The day normally started at 6.45am, with the handover meeting (here, people talked very fast so I often had very little idea of what was going on), before getting changed for AM theatres.

Even though I did not expect to have much responsibility in the way of the operations in Poland, I assumed that I would be able to do what I was used to doing as an English medical student; namely, scrubbing in and maybe assisting a little. I was to discover, disappointingly, that Poland, being a very bureaucratic country, would not even let their own residents (our equivalent FY1 and FY2) scrub into theatre, and therefore there was absolutely no possibility of my doing so!

Watching the surgery itself was useful in some aspects: I was able to see lots of techniques and methods that I haven't yet been exposed to in England. There was, for example, the removal of a fairly superficial but grotesque tumour from the chest of an elderly gentleman: the surgeons gave it a wide berth, and removed an area of skin around the size of an A5 notebook, pulling either side back together to close the hole. I have to say that the sheer elasticity of human flesh really impressed me, and once healed this particular gentleman won't look particularly notable apart from the fact that his nipples will be very close together.

Australia

The medicine which I witnessed in Australia was pretty much identical to that seen in the UK: there was even a huge number of British doctors, or "Poms". My reason for going to this country was mostly for personal pleasure: I wanted to explore this vast country "Down Under!"

In the Obstetrics & Gynaecology department I had mostly an observant role, spending time with the consultants in clinics, residents in theatre, and midwives on labour ward. I also took histories from patients and had the opportunity to conduct a number of minor procedures myself (many pap smears and even the removal of a cervical polyp!).

One of the main highlights was unexpected: a four-hour-endometriosis operation: seemingly quite boring (especially after many weeks of theatre in Poland!) but the supervising surgeon (a professor) proved to be the most enthusiastic teacher of anatomy, and he narrated non-stop during the mammoth procedure, making sure that I, and the other students, learnt at least one new fact every 10s. The enthusiasm and "Raw Aussie Energy" of many of the doctors I met was something to be admired.

Of course, it would be remiss of me to not give space to talk about just what an amazing time I had outside of the hospital too; Sydney is one of the world's major cities, and as a self-proclaimed "foodie" I had, culinarily, the best four weeks of my entire life. Asian Fusion food and Australian brunches made up the bulk of my diet. I also had the opportunity to visit countless museums and art galleries (The Museum of NSW was my favourite), hiked in the Blue Mountains, attended a rugby game, paddled on Bondi Beach (the water was a bit too cold in the Australian Winter), spent a weekend break in Brisbane, and went diving on The Great Barrier Reef. I met medical students from many countries: from England, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, Australia to name a few, and I feel incredibly blessed to have connected with such incredible soon-to-be-medical-professionals and now to have friends scattered all over the world.