

AMSF Travel Scholarship Report

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Destination: United States of America



**ADELAIDE MEDICAL
STUDENTS' FOUNDATION**

Deciding my External Elective

Numerous ideas came into my mind when I was deciding where to do my external elective back in my 4th year. First of all, I was thinking whether I should go to a developing or a developed country. On one hand I always wanted to explore different ways of medical practice and participate in the Medecin Sans Frontieres for missions in third-world countries; on the other hand I wished to broaden my horizon with the state-of-the-art techniques and equipments in medicine. Secondly, I was thinking which continent I wanted to go. The place I chose should be appealing to me since I could well be travelling alone. Last but not least were language and cultural difference. If I do not speak in a common language to communicate effectively with the staff and patients, I doubted how much I could gain from the experience. After extensive research and comparison between developing and developed countries, another crucial thing I found was there were many more rules and regulations in developed countries for elective programmes. It is really hard to do a short-term programme in developed countries if you are a trainee or simply graduated from a medical programme, but relatively easier to get a place while you are still a medical student. Therefore after careful considerations, I decided to go to an English-speaking, well-developed country for my external elective. Then the question was: what medical specialty I should choose?

The idea of becoming a surgeon is crystal clear in my mind after my surgical rotation in 4th year. I subsequently did a research project relating to breast cancer with my breast/endocrine surgery supervisor at TQEH and developed an interest in surgical oncology. As suggested by my supervisor, I approached Dr Sosa at Yale University for the opportunity of a doing a surgical oncology clinical elective since this sub-specialty is yet to be developed in Australia. Dr Sosa is also specialized in endocrine surgery which I do not have much experience, therefore this elective at Yale is unquestionably fulfilling my dream.



Yale School of Medicine and Yale-New Haven Hospital (YNHH)

Yale School of Medicine is celebrating its 200th anniversary in the 2010-11 academic year and it is one of the world's leading institutions for biomedical research, education and advanced clinical care. Gaining clinical experience at Yale will be a once in a life-time chance that no one would like to miss. Yale-New Haven Hospital is the primary teaching hospital of Yale School of Medicine. It is a 1008-bed tertiary medical centre with more than 3600 physicians in more than 100 specialty areas.

It is definitely out of my expectation that I can actually obtain an external elective opportunity in this prestige Ivy-league university. Many thanks to my research project supervisor, Dr Christine Lai at The Queen Elizabeth Hospital (TQEH), who introduced me to Dr Julie Ann Sosa at the Yale Medical School. With the help of Dr Sosa, I was subsequently granted a place in the external elective programme. However, the application process was not easy, involving medical clearance, vaccinations, immunization proof, TOEFL exam and numerous documents to fill in. Plan well ahead of time is definitely a critical part in organizing external elective.

Patiently waited for 6 months, my application was finally approved. I was delighted to accept the offer, but a big problem also arrived - fee for the elective, accommodation and travel expenses. At that moment I was working with 2 part-time jobs and hopefully my savings would be enough to pay for it, but life had been really difficult together with the heavy workload of fifth year and therefore obtaining the AMSF Travel Scholarship meant a lot to me and made my dream came true.



Why Surgical Oncology?

Surgical oncology is a new sub-specialty in surgery which is not yet ratified by the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS), but The American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) has just approved the subspecialty certificate in complex general surgical oncology in late March 2011. This area of expertise is unique as it focuses on the surgical management of cancer which incorporates with chemotherapy and radiotherapy in cancer treatment. There are only 19 accredited medical centres in US which organize this sub-specialty training and Yale School of Medicine is one of them.

The concept of multidisciplinary approach to cancer treatment is now internationally recognized and it largely depends on medical professional who specializes in the field. As cancer will remain the biggest and commonest challenge among human diseases, the knowledge in this area will be greatly beneficial and possibly contributes to future development of this sub-specialty in Australia.

At YNHH, the surgical oncology team performs many complex surgical procedures including gastrectomy, mastectomy with reconstruction, Whipple procedure, excision of sarcoma and robotic surgery. Multidisciplinary tumour board meeting will be held once a week for case discussion.

Endocrine Surgery at YNHH

The endocrine surgery service at YNHH is one of the top 3 centres in the United States. Common procedures include thyroidectomy, parathyroidectomy and adrenalectomy. It receives referrals from all over the world and routinely more than 30 thyroidectomies, 12 parathyroidectomies and 1 adrenalectomy are performed each week.

General Experience

As an elective student, I was generally treated the same as a Yale medical student. I was allowed to participate in all sessions and literally functioned as a team member. The programme was very-well organized compared to some other external electives that I have done. The team knew I would be visiting and assigned duties for me on the very first day of my rotation.

A Typical Day of the Rotation

American doctors work hard, really hard. The very first day I was told to attend the ward round at 6:15am which I thought it was very early, but obviously I was wrong. It was almost the latest start of my entire rotation. Typically the ward round started around 5:00am and there was an evening post-operative ward round after the day's theatre list. The day team could usually hand-over to the night team around 7:00pm.

Operating Theatre

There are 4 different operating areas in YNHH, each consists of 8-12 operating rooms. It is modernized and equipped. The procedures themselves might not be much different from Australian practice, but there are 2 types of specialized staff which I have not come across in Australia: surgical technician and physician assistant. Surgical technicians are professionally trained staff which replaced the role of scrub nurse. They have more knowledge about surgical procedures and equipments and usually specialized in certain types of operation. Physician assistants help surgeons in many ways: they are the assistants in the operations, qualified medical professionals in post-operative care and the great helpers in administrative work and documentations.

I was able to scrub in many different procedures and actively involved in patient care. This enriched my surgical experience and deeply influenced my idea of becoming an oncology surgeon.

Clinic

I was allowed to follow the attending doctors in clinic. One thing I noticed was they were really careful on the medico-legal aspect. They explained every option to patients in great details and communicated well with patients' primary care providers. I am not saying the Australian practice is missing this aspect, but the Americans are really cautious in this aspect.

Extra-curricular Activities

New Haven is the home to Yale University. Apart from the busy hospital life, I was able to tour around Yale University and some cities on the East coast. I also formed new friendships with the other elective students who came from Germany, United Kingdom, India, Turkey, Malaysia and other states of the United States. During a long weekend, I went to visit my friends in Philadelphia, New York City and Washington DC which was another highlight of my stay.



Conclusion

This elective is important to my future career path as it gives me a strong indication of which SET programme I wish to apply. Finding something that can keep you interested for the rest of your life is extremely important, therefore I am very grateful to be given a chance to explore a new sub-specialty area. Many thanks to the AMSF Travel Scholarship which makes my dream come true.

