

Erasmus Placement Report – Charite Berlin



Why European Studies?

I choose to do the European Studies option at Manchester as I felt it was a unique opportunity. Having grown up in Germany, it seemed like a waste not to consolidate my language skills and experience what it is like to actually work in the German healthcare system. I was lucky enough to get to go to Berlin for my 4 month placement, I city which I would more than happily return to!

Having been to an international school in Frankfurt (English parents who got jobs in Germany), I had a head start at the language and the way of life in Germany. This placement to me was less of a culture shock and more like coming home. I also did one of my 3rd year PEPs in Germany so had a vague idea of what life is like as a medical student.

I choose to do placements in gynaecology and obstetrics, as this is what I am hoping to pursue as a career. I also rotated in tropical medicine, as I hope to work internationally, as well as dermatology as I felt I lacked knowledge and experience in this.

My time at the Charite was certainly some of the most challenging during my medical school career. Directly after finals you are thrown in at the deep end, clerking in patients in German and working long days. This at times felt very

unfair in comparison to my peers off on electives on the beach, however overall I feel I had an extremely rewarding experience and feel far more ready to start FY1!

German Medical System

Having grown up in Germany, many elements of the culture seemed very familiar, however hospital life was still a steep learning curve. I found myself comparing the German and British health systems daily, recognising the strengths and limitations of both systems. The opportunity has been invaluable in giving me a new perspective on medical practise and a better understanding of whether I would like to work in Germany in future.

Starting on gynaecology, I found the first few days very challenging, having been thrown straight into the deep end being asked to clerk in patients in German! I also soon learned that the main job of medical students on placement in Germany is to act as a phlebotomist. German students do one month placements during their summer holidays called Famulatur. Then in their final "Praktisches Jahr" they spend the entire year in the hospital on 3 different 4 month blocks (tertials). The PJ students are a bit like FY1s in the UK but they don't get paid.

As German medical students are expected to do most of the practical jobs on the ward, I feel they have limited time to actually learn on the wards. I was surprised how clinical skills are not officially taught at medical school and there are no simulation suits. I taught several other students to do cannulas and allowed them to practise on me.

Another major difference between German and British medical education is the emphasis on patient contact. Whilst we learn through taking histories on the wards and bedside teaching, German medical students learn all their knowledge in lectures. We are examined through OSCEs, assessing our ability to deal with patients, whereas they are purely examined through written and multiple-choice papers. Their factual knowledge is impeccable and I found myself shocked at the level of detail they knew, however often I felt my student colleagues lacked a general understanding of how a condition presents in a patient. Despite lacking some of the facts, I feel the UK system has taught me a much better general overview of medicine.

This goes hand in hand with a lack of emphasis on taking a good history and a thorough examination. The German hospital system is heavily weighted towards doing investigations as quickly as possible. Hospitals are time poor but able to afford the extra scan, so repeatedly I saw patients being sent off for chest x-rays before anyone auscultated the lungs etc. I felt that this culture of rapidly ordering investigations often prevented the doctors from thinking critically about their patients.

German hospitals are also funded by private insurance companies, rather than the state. There are multiple companies, which offer slightly different deals,

ensuring that all options remain competitive. Patients and their employers both pay 7% of their salary into their health insurance, and those who cannot afford to pay are covered by the insurance companies. Therefore all patients are able to receive a high level of care, yet often an inpatient stay is dictated by how the insurance companies pay out for things. Simple procedures such as colonoscopies, which are outpatient procedures in the UK, are done as inpatients, as that way the hospital can charge the insurance company more. Alternatively, patients are sometimes discharged before they are ready, as an insurance company will only pay for a certain number of days stay for particular conditions. It was very interesting to see how this system worked and compare it to the NSH.

Another big difference in Germany is that there are many community clinics for specialties such as gynaecology, dermatology and orthopaedics etc (Niedergelassen). Therefore the GP isn't the gatekeeper to all other specialties, allowing patients to go directly to the relevant doctor. This massively cuts down on waiting times, as well as the GP's workload. In Germany, the time it takes from first presentation to having an elective knee replacement is around 6 weeks; this compares to 21 weeks in the UK. Despite the reduction in waiting time and unnecessary duplicate appointments, I feel the GP system in the UK is very good, as it allows one doctor to have a better overview of a patient. Here a patient can easily slip through the cracks, as they are seen by multiple specialists for multiple problems, without any doctor looking at the patient as a whole.

Practicalities

Prior to arriving in Germany

Even before arriving in Berlin, we started to experience the German bureaucracy, filling in countless forms, all of which required the correct institution stamp. You will receive a lot of paper work from Manchester and the Charite international offices to fill in prior to arriving. Most of this requires signing and sending back but check all the deadlines so you do not send it in late. You will also be sent a language exam by the Charite, which I failed initially! Despite having just passed my C1, I only got a B1 in this exam. It is a strange cross word puzzle style exam but you can re-sit it if you fail.

You will also need to apply for your placements. You can apply to anything at the Charite hospital or the Vivantes hospitals in Berlin (Vivantes are a chain of hospitals throughout Berlin which is separate to the Charite complex) but you need a minimum of C1 in the language exam to do A&E. Try to email the secretaries of the head of the department asap to ensure you get the placements you want. This is what I sent (with my CV attached):

Sehr geehrte XX,

ich heiße Hannah und bin eine Erasmusstudentin der Charité aus Manchester.

Ich möchte gerne in der Zeit vom xx bis xx in der Klinik für xx famulieren.

Meine Deutschkenntnisse sind sehr gut (C1 Niveau).

Über eine positive Antwort würde ich mich sehr freuen. Bitte informieren Sie mich, wenn Sie weitere Unterlagen benötigen.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen
Hannah Raval

You will also need to make sure your vaccination records are up to date, ask the Charite office (our contact was Nikola Lepom) for the occupational health form and take this ASAP to the Manchester occupational health office. Even if you don't require anything, you need them to sign and stamp the official form so try to get this out of the way early (we did it far too late). Once completed, send this form to the Charite occupational health department and they will let you know if you require an additional appointment in Germany.

You will then also need to make an appointment at the town hall (Buergeramt) to register aka Anmeldung. This can be done at any of the town halls but it is good to book this online at least a month before. You will need to bring your passport, birth certificate and proof of address at where ever you are living in Berlin (double check before you agree to live somewhere as not everywhere lets you do the Anmeldung).

First week

In the first week you will have an appointment with the Charite international placements office where they will go through your paper work and register you as a student at the Charite. All the information about this will be emailed to you as well as your log in details for their version of Blackboard, which has lots of useful information.

You will then be given some forms to take to another office to pick up your student card. As a Charite student you have to pay semester fees (about £300 in total) but in return you get a student card which gives you free public transport across the city). Make sure you have a print out of the bank transaction (not just your bank statement) to take with you to this office in order to get your student card. The U-bahn and S-bahn in Berlin is great and you can get around the city really easily and quickly! You will also see the weirdest sights on the U-bahn...

During this week we also went for our Anmeldung appointment and spent some time getting our bearings around the city. I already had a German bank account so I didn't need to sort this. You get a "cash passport" from Manchester with your Erasmus grant money on it, however you only get the 1st instalment about 2 weeks into the placement (once you have sent off your arrival form). We still haven't received the 2nd instalment... German is also considered a 'low cost country' (which I don't entirely agree with). Also now you can use EU roaming on

your phone there is no real need to get a German sim card. It is also the week you get your finals results so we also did come celebrating!!

Living

We also decided to find a place to live before arriving to save stress when we got there. I lived with 2 other girls from Manchester and we stayed in an Airbnb. When we were looking a few months in advanced we were struggling to find anything online available. Most spare rooms (www.wg-gusucht.de) only become available max one month before, however we didn't want this stress during our finals. It is also very difficult to find a WG with multiple free rooms and we wanted to live as a 3. I personally really enjoyed living with the girls from Manchester as we were able to relax and socialise together in the evenings, (having spoken German all day at the hospital), and support each other when we were finding things stressful.

It is also worth noting that many WGs will only give you a room if you see it in person, which makes things more challenging doing it from abroad. Also if you find something that seems to good to be true, it probably is! There are a lot of scams on the website. An alternative place to look would be on facebook groups, either on berlin housing groups or ones specifically for medical students in their PJ year (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/525592957587011/about/>).

We paid around £500 per month for our very nice airbnb with 2 bedrooms and a sofa bed, not cheap but a safe option! Having spoken to many people in Berlin, rent usually ranges from about £350-£550 depending on how nice the place is. We lived at the border between Neukoelln and Kreuzberg.

This is my guide to the areas in Berlin (called Kiez):



Good places to live:

- Kreuzberg = lots of cool bars and places to eat and close to the centre.
- Neukoelln = north Neukoelln is good as it is a mix of Turkish culture and hipster Berlin culture. Too far south becomes a little more dangerous and far out.
- Prenzlauerberg = lots of posh young professionals live here. Really nice cafes and shops but a bit pricey.
- Mitte = centre of the city, pricey.
- Friedrichshain = very hipster area, where all the big nightclubs are.
- Schoeneberg = lots of families live here.
- Charlottenberg = very posh area.
- Wedding = good if you want to live by the hospital but not much going on.

Be ready to expect a system full of rules, which don't always make much sense. Generally things work if you stick to their rules, just try not to argue with them or hand things in late!

Placements

Gynaecology- Virchow Clinic

I had an interesting experience on my gynaecology placement. This was my first placement in Berlin and therefore a steep learning curve! The gynaecology department at Virchow is a specialist gynae oncology centre so I saw lots of very interesting cases but very little routine gynaecology.

I found the first few days very challenging, having been thrown straight into the deep end being asked to clerk in patients in German whilst trying to get my head around all the different chemotherapy regimens. My job on the ward was to take all the bloods in the morning and any other practical jobs that needed doing (I got to learn new skills, such as taking blood from a chemotherapy port or central line, and removing drains and stitches). After I was done I could either stay and help on the ward clerking in patients, assist in theatre or go to clinics. I was lucky to have 2 other famulant students on the ward so we could spread ourselves out.

I would not highly recommend this placement as it is a very stressful department where the doctors have zero time to teach or explain anything. The morning meeting starts at 7.30am and the afternoon meeting lasts till 4pm, after which I could go home.

Obstetrics- Virchow Clinic

I really enjoyed my placement on obstetrics in Berlin. I am particularly interested in obstetrics and this placement is ideal for learning about some more rare and obscure presentations and I had a lot of freedom to go and see what I wanted to see. This placement started at 8am and lasted till after the afternoon

meeting at 4pm, however you could leave earlier as no one really new were you were most of the time.

Having gained some confidence on German wards on my previous placement, I was quickly able to slip into the routine of the postnatal ward, taking bloods and helping with general ward jobs. I soon learned the "discharge speech" and I was then able to do most of the ward discharges myself, making me a useful part of the team. By the end of the placement, I was doing my own ward rounds on the postnatal ward. I really enjoyed my time here as although it became somewhat repetitive, I was able to actually get involved.

In the afternoons I had the opportunity to either go to the labour ward or to clinics. I saw a few vaginal deliveries and c-sections during my placement, however I often felt that I could learn more elsewhere as much of the time spent on labour ward it spent waiting and you are over limited use as a medical student.

I particularly enjoyed going to clinics as many of the high risk pregnancies were monitored at this hospital. I often attended the "Infectious disease clinic" which saw women with HIV and the foetal anomaly ultrasound clinic. In this clinic I saw many foetuses with congenital heart problems and trisomies and learnt how to spot these on a foetal ultrasound. I was fortunate enough to be able to attend a foetal ultrasound teaching day of specialty doctors on my last day of placement. This was a fascinating day with talks from professors from throughout Germany.

Tropical Medicine – Virchow Clinic

My placement in tropical medicine was extremely interesting. Despite it being purely clinic based, I was able to see a vast range of tropical diseases and sick patients. Having had very little knowledge of tropical medicine, parasitology and infectious disease before the placement, the first few days were challenging. I soon started to recognise the patterns and learn the key differentials for traveller's diarrhoea, fever and various common skin rashes.

We generally saw patients who had returned home from a holiday in a tropical country who were now unwell, mostly with fever, abdominal symptoms or a skin rash. We also got to see a lot of refugees coming for a general health check. During this placement I had the opportunity to learn how to ultrasound and spend some time in the parasitology lab. I also got to run my own clinic and see my own patients.

As it was clinic based, the days started around 8.30am and I was usually finished by 3.30pm (although this was very relaxed, beware that German doctors often don't take lunch breaks so eat a big breakfast!). The tropical institute also has a travel vaccination department, which I spent a bit of time in but this was quite repetitive.

The team in tropical medicine was made up of ex MSF doctors and crazy professors that had worked all over the world. They were extremely welcoming

and keen to teach and I felt like part of a family in this department! I would highly recommend this placement to any one considering working in tropical countries in future.

Dermatology - Mitte

My last placement in Berlin was in dermatology. I was placed on the medical dermatology ward, where most of the cases were very rare disease such as T Cell Lymphomas that I had never heard of before. Having chosen this placement to get better at recognising BCCs and SCCs, I was a little disappointed. However I did see some very interesting pathology that I am unlikely to see again in future, such as Stills Disease and the Bullous diseases.

This placement was an excellent last placement to have as in many ways it was like a student assistantship. It was very clear what my role was and I felt fully part of the team. I would start the day taking all the bloods and doing the cannulas. This was excellent practise as many of the patients had lymphoedema or very thin skin, which made it a lot more challenging. This has given me a boost of confidence as I know that I do not need to fear clinical skills when starting work. Once I was finished with the blood taking, I was expected to help start clerking patients in and writing up their patient summary letters. Generally the days were from 8am till around 5.30pm.

Recommendations

Museums:

- German History Museum – good overview of the history of the last century in Germany
- Story of Berlin Museum – interactive museum giving a good overview of life in Berlin throughout the ages
- Kulturbrauerei Museum – free museum giving a good picture of life in the DDR
- Medical History Museum at the Charite – free for students, lots of very interesting specimens!
- Gemaeldegalerie – nice art gallery
- Jewish museum – very interesting architecture
- CO Berlin – cool photography museum

Touristy things:

- Walking around the Museum Island
- East side gallery
- Mauerpark – On Sundays there is a very lively flee market at Mauerpark which has a lot of live music and Karaoke on in the summer
- Botanical garden – very impressive in the spring.
- Templehof – abandoned airport now turned into a park. Amazing place to go running along the old runways!
- Tiergarten – beautiful park in the city centre
- Walking along the Spree river

- Teufelsberg – old spy station outside the city which has been taken over by squatters and covered in very cool graffiti
- Berlin Zoo - very impressive zoo with pandas!
- Schloss Charlottenburg
- Tour of the Reichstag
- Badeschiff – outdoor swimming pool in the Spree river, amazing on a hot day.
- Day trip to Potsdam – really beautiful small city a short train ride from Berlin. Worth going to walk around the palace gardens and go into the Neues Palast
- Trip to Wannensee – lovely lake near Berlin where you can swim and rent little boats on a summers day
-

Food:

- Café am Neuen See – beer garden and pizzeria by the lake in Tiergarten
- Buergermeister – amazing burger place in Kreuzberg
- Hamy Café – incredible cheap Vietnamese restaurant near Hermannplatz
- Hasir – very good (but a bit pricey) Turkish food near Kotbussertor
- Geist im Glass – very hipster brunch place
- Café Anne Blume – traditional German cakes in a lovely café in Prenzlauerberg
- Ora – very cool restaurant in an old converted pharmacy near Kotbussertor
- Thai park - Preussenpark hosts a massive Thai street food market during the weekends in the summer, amazing food!
- Markthalle Neun – massive street food market every Thursday evening

Bars:

- Villa Neukoelln – old converted ballroom, very cool place to go for a drink (we went almost weekly!)
- Klunkerkranich – hipster bar on top of a shopping centre in Neukoelln, really cool atmosphere! Only open from April.
- Monkey Bar – swanky bar at the top of a hotel with a view over the zoo. A bit pricey but very good view!
- Club de Visionaere – cool bar along the riverside, only open from April.
- Sisyphos – bit open air nightclub, a bit like a music festival, worth the 1.5hr queue!!
- Salon der Wilde Renate – indoor techno club, a bit like a massive house party. We went at 5am to avoid the queue.
- Bar at the TV tower – a bit pricey but we went as a celebration on our last day, amazing 360 views of Berlin.

My top tips!

- Apply for your famulatur placements early to get what you want!
- Stick to the deadlines.

- If you want to have more freedom on the wards, tell them you are a Famulant. If you want to be part of the team but working hard, tell them you are a PJ student. (PJ students also get one day off per week as a “study day” so you might get lucky and get one of these!)
- In the hospital students wear jeans, tshirts and trainers under their white coats. Don’t bother packing smart clinical clothes.
- Bring your warmest clothes you own, Berlin in January/February is freezing!!
- Bring you summer clothes too! April and May was glorious weather.
- Leave space in your luggage as there are so many cool vintage shops and flea markets to shop at!
- Try to make friends with the local students on your wards.
- Try and see as much as possible at the weekends and evenings, it is such an amazing place! There are also lots of bank holidays in May to make the most of.
- Have fun!!!!



Charite Tower



Currywurst and the Dom



Berlin Wall



Templehof Park



View from Monkey Bar



Teufelsberg



Thaipark



Café Anne Blume



Klunkerkranich



Club de Visionaere



Potsdam



Wannsee