

Erasmus Report

Introduction

My name is ●● and I completed my European Studies Placement at Charité Universitätsmedizin Berlin in Germany in May 2018. I was there doing clinical placements for a total of four months with each placement lasting 4 weeks. The placements I undertook in order were Dermatology, Cardiology, Accident & Emergency and Ophthalmology. With this report I would like to highlight some experiences from these placements as well as provide useful information for future medical students hoping to undertake clinical placements in Germany as part of the European Studies Option, especially for the ones interested in Berlin. I have tried to keep the report concise and to the point and have used subheadings in order to allow you to read about those aspects that you really want to know about.

My reasons to study on the European Studies Programme

The reason I chose to study on the European Studies Programme is firstly to acquire an opportunity to strengthen and maintain my German Language skills. I myself was brought up in Germany during my childhood and so the main goal for me was to maintain my general German Language skills and add German Medical Terminology to my vocabulary. Another important reason for me was to gain an insight into the German healthcare system in order to see if I could see myself returning to Germany in the future to work there as a doctor. Lastly, I think undertaking a placement like this allows you to add an additional touch of uniqueness to your CV and portfolio as no other university within the UK offers an option for European Studies as part of the medical degree. The skills you develop during this placement are highly transferable and I will talk about these skills later in the report.

Differences in medical training

The Charité Universitätsmedizin Berlin is a Europe-wide renowned hospital site that consists of multiple campuses in and around the city of Berlin. The three main campuses are Charité Campus Mitte (CCM), Campus Virchow Klinikum (CVK) and Campus Benjamin Franklin (CBF). My first two placements took place in CCM whereas my last two placements were completed in CVK. Before I go on to describe some of my experiences during these placements, I'd like to explain the basics of the way the German system for studying Medicine works by comparing to the UK system. Unlike in the UK, the medical course in Germany lasts a total of 6 years with the last year being described as "Praktisches Jahr" or in short "PJ"; a year in which the student known as a "PJ-ler" undertakes only clinical placements at hospital site and where most rotate the ward they work at every 4 months.

Another thing I have noted from speaking to other students there is that their training programme offers a lot of flexibility and freedom. To a large degree, they can simply decide when they want to sit which exam and what modules they want to sit it for. They can also take "breaks" from the course and interrupt the studies temporarily for reasons that wouldn't be accepted in the UK such as needing a break or wanting to travel abroad. On another point, the Manchester training programme provides a lot more clinical experience to their students compared to the amount that students get there in Berlin.

Their first 4 semesters are almost entirely academical and following that they may only get to undertake up to 2 short clinical placements per year on average.

PJ-ler vs Farmulant

Even though I was automatically considered a “Farmulant” which is a student who is undertaking a short clinical placement and is generally considered to be inexperienced, I just explained that I am in my final year to the doctors and PJ-lers there and hence I pretty much got to do what a PJ does. That’s also what I would advise you to do simply because PJ’s get to do more hands-on compared to a simple “Farmulant” and it becomes a really great learning experience ahead of starting Foundation Year 1. I got to see the patients myself, examine them, clerk them, take bloods, insert cannula and even check their lab results on the computer system, write up discharge letters and note down the history and examination results in their patient files. I would also say that being pro-active about acquiring your personal learning goals is vital to getting the most out of these placements. As an Erasmus Student who is also in reality a Farmulant who will leave in four weeks, doctors with the busy schedule they have do not and cannot take responsibility for your learning and so it is important to find opportunities yourself and simply ask. For example, in my Cardiology placement, I found a lot of free time in the late morning between 10 AM and noon. I often took the opportunity to ask the doctors on the ward if I could go to the echocardiography department or to the cardiac catheter lab. Through this, I even got the opportunity to observe an electrical cardioversion which was very interesting. Hence, I recommend you to find out what things are available within your department to see and experience and just ask one of the doctors politely if you could go ahead and spend a few hours there or even the day.

My Dermatology placement

Next up I’d like to give a short summary of the clinical placements I undertook at the Charité Universitätsmedizin Berlin in the hope that people who are interested in undertaking any of the same clinical placements can know what to expect. Starting with Dermatology, this was my first clinical placement in Germany and it specifically took place at the “Klinik für Dermatologie, Venerologie und Allergologie” at Charité Campus Mitte. Being my first placement in Germany meant that I had to adapt to the way a wide variety of things are done from using the German language constantly to quickly learning how the German healthcare system and service works. This was a challenge indeed but at the same time allowed me to go through a massive learning experience, which I’m sure you will too. In this placement, like I advised above, I explained that I am in my final year to the ward doctors and spent time doing tasks that a PJ-ler would. The ward was a short-stay surgical ward and I got to join the ward rounds, clerk new patients who were planned to be admitted that day and write up their notes on the computer system. Patients would often come in to be admitted for their elective surgery the same or the following day. I would assist in clerking these patients by taking a full history, doing a dermatological examination where I would even get a chance to use a dermatoscope and then handing the patient over to one of the doctors. One of practical skills I developed significantly in this placement was performing a competent and thorough dermatological examination and being more confident in assessing suspicious skin lesions. Another thing I liked about this placement that the staff was very friendly and relaxed and the day would start at 9 AM which is not that early compared to other wards. Overall your first

placement is bound to be challenging as it will demand you to adapt to an environment that you are completely estranged to but the pieces will quickly come together and overall it will be a very rewarding experience, as was this placement.

My Cardiology placement

My Cardiology placement took place at the “Medizinische Klinik mit Schwerpunkt Kardiologie und Angiologie” at Charité Campus Mitte. I was particularly excited for this placement as I did not get an opportunity in any of my previous placements in Manchester to experience the specialty of Cardiology despite my personal interest in this field. The placement did not turn out to be the way I expected it. Almost the entire morning would be dedicated to taking bloods. This is because in Germany, on most wards, taking bloods and inserting cannulas is expected to be carried out by the Farmulanten and PJ-ers although the ultimate responsibility for these tasks lies with the ward doctor. Getting plenty of practice in taking bloods was a good learning experience, however it wasn't really what I intended to learn when I applied for this placement. In fact, on a lot of wards there in Berlin, Farmulanten and PJ-ers take all the regular bloods and so this is also something you can expect to do, even outside of Cardiology. The afternoon I would get opportunities to take histories and examine patients which allowed me to develop core skills such as screening for cardiovascular risk factors, taking a focused history and performing a cardiovascular examination. However, the doctors wouldn't really have much time to teach, explain or answer any of your questions in depth, which is why I quickly realised that taking initiative myself would be the best way to make the most of this placement. Hence, I started asking the doctors for permission to attend the echo department, attending the catheter lab as well as observing an electrical cardioversion which was very interesting. Therefore, I advise you to not be afraid to ask if there is something you want to do, even if you need to ask more than once. If you feel you are not learning a great deal, I suggest you to talk to someone about this, ideally one of the doctors on the ward that you feel comfortable talking with.

My A&E placement

This placement took place at the “Internistische Notfallversorgung” at Charité Campus Virchow Klinikum. I chose this placement because even though I spent some weeks in A&E in Manchester, I felt my knowledge and skills are not adequate enough and that overall I wanted to develop these qualities in relation to acute situations before the start of my F1 post. This was one of my more active placements as following acutely unstable patients throughout their resuscitation process has helped me understand how to apply the ABCDE approach in real life. Witnessing acute procedures such as intubation and acute dialysis was a good experience to see as it has helped me understand when these might be indicated and why. Likewise, observing ultrasound investigations has helped me understand how these may be carried out and what technique may be used to visualise the different organs within the abdominal cavity. So, if you also want to improve any of these skills or generally further your ability to help in acute situations, I strongly recommend A&E. However, you might want to know that the ward round starts at 7:30 AM. I got to clerk the new patients coming in myself, by taking a history, examining them, coming up with a differential diagnosis and handing over to one of the A&E doctors. Hence, I was quite independent and there was lots of learning opportunities for me. However, a lot of patients would also

come in with benign pathology and psychosomatic symptoms. In addition, there is quite a bit of typing on the computer as you need to note down the history you took as well as the examination findings for each patient. I think this placement is great for learning some of the core clinical skills needed for an F1 but beyond that it is fairly limited.

My Ophthalmology Placement

This is a placement that I picked because I was curious about ophthalmology and the week we spend in this field during our medical training at Manchester was not sufficient for me personally. This placement took place specifically at the "Klinik für Augenheilkunde" at the Charité Campus Virchow Klinikum. The department was quite big and included 3 different wards, multiple outpatient clinics, theatres for both elective and non-elective surgeries as well as a "Kinder Sehschule" which basically was an outpatient clinic specifically for children. The day would start between 8:00 and 8:30 AM and three times a week there would be a morning topic-specific presentation that would discuss diseases, treatments and research within the field of ophthalmology. Following that I had freedom to go wherever I would like. Often, I would rotate between all the different places every few days which was very good because it allowed me to experience all different aspects of ophthalmology. Getting the opportunity to learn and utilise a variety of machines that measure important things like refraction, ocular pressure, biometrics of the eye as well as the thickness of the cornea was a very stimulating experience. I also learned how to use the slit lamp and visualise the anterior eye and the retina at the back of the eye.

Living in Berlin

Now I want to say a few words about living in Berlin. Berlin itself is a vibrant and multicultural city. Something I particularly liked are the green parks that are dispersed around Berlin. I lived in an area of Berlin called Kreuzberg and in my close vicinity there was a park called Tempelhofer Feld; it's a big green field that used to be an airport and you can actually walk on the flight and landing runway. Since I arrived in January, the first couple months were very cold and dark making it difficult to go out and enjoy the outside. However, the latter 2 months were a lot better and I met up more frequently with the other Manchester students in Berlin to explore Berlin, picnic and other stuff. My advice for you is to make sure you have someone there that you can meet up and go out with or alternatively that you put in some effort to make some friends in Berlin early on, which can be a challenge as you rotate placements every 4 weeks. My advice to you is to seek out Erasmus or any other Erasmus Society at the Charité and attend their events. It was an amazing experience to meet so many medical students from all across Europe and it's something you really cannot ever imagine doing elsewhere.

The influence of the placement on my German Language skills

In terms of my German linguistic skills, they have improved a lot although I do need to mention at this point that I was born and raised in Germany up to the age of 13 and hence always had fluency within this language. That is not to say that there wasn't any space for further improvement; quite the opposite, I had developed my own personal weaknesses within my German language skills which have

massively improved by this placement. This includes expanding my word vocabulary significantly for conversational discourse as well as for Medical German. Since I moved from Germany to England in 2008, I had lost a bit of the natural flow of expressing my thoughts and ideas during normal conversations and at the start of the placement I would often stutter and take pauses while trying to think of the right words to express what I am thinking. This would also have a negative impact on my self-esteem as I would feel like I am taking far too long to finish a sentence. However, now that 4 months have gone by, I have enormously improved in this regard and feel much more confident and at ease talking in German. I think most students face this issue and my advice to you is to not take this to heart as you are there for developing your weak points and I promise you that you will make massive improvements over the course of a few weeks.

The influence of the placement on my inter-cultural understanding

In terms of inter-cultural understanding, I can say that there aren't very significant differences in the German and British Culture, at least from what I experienced. Looking at the differences between British and German doctors, German doctors are early birds as their shift starts earlier often at 7 or 7:30 AM. However, another thing I have felt is that they can be less helpful and more in a competitive mindset whereas working in an NHS hospital has more of a social and team-friendly feel. On the other hand, looking at general habits of German Citizens, I also think that Germans are generally a little bit more organised, cleaner and healthier from what I experienced living for more than 4 months with a German Family. My advice to you is to introduce yourself to anyone new that you meet, telling them your name and role, because it's seen as a polite act and immediately forms a friendly relation which may or may not end up being quite important for you.

The influence of the placement on my career ideas

One thing that Germany has opened my mind to is career paths. Getting to choose your own placements is fantastic as it allows you to experience specialties that you have really enjoyed in the past or find out more about fields that you are curious about as you perhaps did not get much opportunities of experiencing that field prior. Whatever the case may be, spending an extra four weeks in four different specialty departments of your choice is a great opportunity to figure out what you enjoy, what you may think about doing in future and what kind of work that field involves. I myself was quite unsure about what I wanted to do in the future and hence chose my placement according to my top four specialties I was considering for the future. In my case, my ophthalmology placement ended up being a really enjoyable and insightful experience which has now sparked my interest in this specialty as a future career path. In most medical schools within the UK you only spend a single week within a field like ophthalmology and hence getting to spend an extra four weeks allowed me to understand what being an ophthalmologist means, what type of work is involved and what further opportunities a career in ophthalmology can offer and I am sure you will experience similar insightful placements.

Practical issues to know about

In regards to practical issues, I've dispersed some advice in the above paragraphs regarding things you may want to know about within the clinical environment. As far as other things are concerned, one thing I want to say is be prepared for the placement. You have to decide early what specialties you want to do and reach out to individual hospital departments yourself in order to get their permission to carry out a Famulatur. You also need to plan your finances well as you receive the 70% of the Erasmus+ Grant early on but the rest you may not even receive before the end of your placement and hence be prepared for that. Look for accommodation early! This is important because stressing about this closer to the time of your finals is not something you need. Also, finding a place that you like and can trust online is not easy and you need to ensure to see the place before you consider signing a contract or transferring a deposit. The best option is to see the place and meet the owner in person however if that's not possible, I recommend having a video call with the owner and seeing the place on a live video call. During your time abroad, don't forget fully about your work in Manchester including keeping up your portfolio, preparing for the PSA and chasing your work-based assessments including UPSA's, U-CEX's and U-CMD's.

Also keep an eye on all the paperwork regarding your Erasmus placement you need to complete before, during and after the placement. It is a lot so starting well ahead in time will always be a good idea. You need to book an appointment at the citizens office in Berlin online in order to register yourself at your new address. You need to book this weeks before you actually travel there as the waiting times are very long. The medical school will demand you to send them a filled-out Transfer of Information (TOI) in march which is part of the Transfer of Information process that has been developed to help you make a smooth transition from medical school to the Foundation Programme. This form needs to be posted to the SWAPS office and so posting from Germany will take longer. Make sure you send it in good time. I also recommend you to start working on your Erasmus Report a couple of weeks before your placement finishes so that you can complete it within the 1-week post-placement deadline.

Important Contact Email addresses you may want to know about

Frau Walz; Secretary of the Ophthalmology department in CVK: Anke.Walz@charite.de

Frau Dietrich; Secretary of the A&E department in CVK: tamara.dietrich@charite.de

Frau Thomas; Secretary of the Cardiology & Angiology department in CCM: Vera.Thomas@charite.de

Erasmix Society; Erasmix Team, email them to find out what events are going to take place soon if you are interested in meeting other European medical students: erasmix.charite@gmail.com

Fakultät - Referat für Studienangelegenheiten: stud-sek@charite.de

International Student Office of Charité Universitätsmedizin Berlin: international-students@charite.de