

EUROPEAN OPTION REPORT

Placement at Hospital Universitario Fundación Jiménez Díaz,
Madrid, Spain

February – May 2015

5th Year Medical Student

University of Manchester

Introduction

I have always been very keen on travelling – the fact that it is a profession found throughout the world is one of the factors that attracted me to medicine. Prior to university I travelled to South America for 3 months. While I was in Peru, I volunteered at a health centre. My basic Spanish improved, and I returned home with a semi-fluent grasp of the language. The idea of having an opportunity to maintain and improve the language was part of what influenced me to choose Manchester as my first choice for University and join the European Option (EO).

My EO placement in Madrid started in February and finished at the end of May 2015, during which I had four rotations in Hospital Universitario de Fundación Jiménez Díaz. My rotations were Internal Medicine, Paediatrics, Accidents and Emergencies and Neurology respectively. The hospital was located centrally, in the district of Moncloa. Moncloa is the end station of the yellow metro line, making it easy to get to via public transport. The hospital was part of Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. All of the information in this essay will pertain to my experiences as an Erasmus student at



1: Hospital Universitario de Fundación Jiménez Díaz

this hospital; I do not know how things work for students at other hospitals or universities.

- **Arriving in Madrid**

Getting ready for the 4-month placement in Madrid had a very surreal feeling to it. Going on this long placement (twice as long as a normal elective) had always seemed like an abstract concept and suddenly it was around the corner. However, preparing for the huge trip was more challenging than I had imagined, especially as we were in the middle of our final exams. Preparation for the trip was understandably left fairly last minute.

Furthermore, perhaps due to trouble communicating information from the medical school or perhaps due to my generally distracted state of mind, I did not have a lot of knowledge about what to expect from this placement. In fact, most of my knowledge regarding the EO placement came

from my peers. This led to my being quite nervous, especially about issues such as how the amount of money I should budget for the trip. I felt like I didn't really know what I was doing. Luckily, I landed on my feet, largely due to asking my friends what they had done and ensuring that I did the same. Over time, I recognised some of the important issues that one might face when moving to Madrid. I will highlight some of what I consider to be key tips for getting settled in to Madrid for the EO placement below.

- **Accommodation:** Having never been in Madrid before, I had no idea about where to even start looking for accommodation. I didn't know where my hospital was, I didn't know where the University was, and I didn't know what kind of standards I should have for Madrileño accommodation.

In order to have the time to get to know the area before settling down, a group of us hired a flat via AirBnB for 2 weeks. This made life much easier when first arriving. It gave us the opportunity to explore Madrid as well as to organise various flat viewings. The house-hunting process took longer than expected and was quite stressful. I recommend using websites such as EasyPiso or idealista.com. It may be worth noting that Spaniards seem to prefer to use Whatsapp rather than texting – it is usually an easier and faster way to organise a viewing compared to normal texting.

- **Documentation:** When getting settled in and opening the various accounts that you will need, copies of important documents are usually required. It would be useful to have several copies of one's passport, as well as copies of one's European Health insurance card.

- **Registering at the University:** Prior to starting at your clinical placements, you have to register at Autonoma University. This is needed in order to get your Certificate of Arrival, which is a prerequisite for receiving the first instalments of the Erasmus Grant, so it is quite important! This involves travelling to Autonoma – which is outside of the central area of Madrid, and signing paperwork at the Oficina de Relaciones Internacionales (ORI). This also required handing in copies of passports and European Health insurance cards. After this, we had to travel to the Medical school Campus, which is in a totally different part of the city, to sign paperwork for our clinical rotations. While this all sounds fairly straightforward, Spain is not always the most efficient of countries and when this is combined with shortened office hours (a lot of the offices might close between 13.00 and 15.00), this process may take more than one day!

- **Public transport:** There are various forms of public transport in Madrid, but the one I have doubtlessly found the most useful is the Metro (Fig 2). While the map may initially look complex and daunting, one quickly gets used to the layout of the city, and a monthly pass with unlimited travel is incredibly useful for quickly getting around Madrid.

In order to get a monthly pass, you first need to obtain the card itself. This can be done in any of the many public transport offices for a nominal fee and also requires a copy of your passport. The ones



2- Map of Madrid Metro system

located in big offices are usually very full and require an appointment. However, there are lesser known ones spread through Madrid (for instance, there was one in the back offices of a tobacco shop in Legazi, a different area that can be reached via the yellow metro line) that are emptier and accept drop-in appointments. Once the card has been obtained, you can charge it for a month at any metro stop. If you live and work centrally, only need to travel in Zone A. If you are under 23 years of age, a monthly travel pass costs 35 euros, if you are older it costs 54 euros.

- **Budgeting:** It is incredibly easy to spend far more money than you intend to, especially before you have started to settle down. Having tapas rather than cooking for oneself, going on nights out, just trying to experience as much of Madrid as possible can eat away at your bank balance very quickly. My suggestion is to plan a weekly budget and withdraw that amount at the start of each week. While life will inevitably be more expensive before one is settled in and steady accommodation is found, it helps to be able to physically see the amount you have available to spend.
- **Starting clinical rotations:** Prior to starting your clinical rotations you need to report to the Docencia, which is basically the administrative office of your hospital. They should have been in contact with the ORI of your university, should know what your rotations are going to be and have a letter that introduces you to your head of department. Whether or not this will actually be the case is a different matter. When arriving, I was under the impression that the ORI or the Docencia would have informed the relevant departments that they would soon have Erasmus students. This was not the case, and several of my rotations did not expect me. However, the staff is usually very laid back and didn't mind that we arrived unexpectedly.

- **Living in Madrid**

Once all of this had been sorted, I started to get to know Madrid. I had found a lovely flat in La Latina, a beautiful barrio with an active nightlife, within a 30-40 minute commute to the hospital. Most days after work I would explore parts of the city – there is a lot to see. Over time, as my grasp of the language improved, I felt more settled in to the Spanish life. However, it took a while to get used to life in the hospital.



3: *El barrio de La Latina*

- Hospital Life

Spanish hospital life is in many ways very different to what I had grown accustomed to in the UK. Firstly, the approach is far more paternalistic than the patient-centred approach that one sees in Manchester. A patient's ideas, concerns and expectations are very low on the list of priorities. For instance, during my rotation in the A&E department, all patients admitted would be striped nude (sometimes being allowed to keep their pants on) with only bed sheets to cover themselves in order to facilitate the clinical examination. Maintaining the patient's dignity, as we are rigorously taught in the UK is not really considered. In fact, most patients seem to expect this process and do not seem to mind it. However, for the few who do mind it, going to hospital may sometimes be an excessively traumatic experience. Furthermore, doctors are not as accustomed to having their knowledge being

questioned. For example, I witnessed a patient express doubts about taking their Warfarin to their doctor, being worried about the side effects. The doctor's response was basically to tell the patient off, stating that "I have many years of medical training, and you don't. I am the doctor and you are the patient. If you want to stay healthy you should do as I say." I doubt that this would be considered acceptable in the UK.

Furthermore, more emphasis lay on investigations than clinical examination. In some departments a patient's management plan would be established based solely on their blood tests, without actually seeing them. Sometimes patients would receive routine tests that may be considered invasive or risky in the UK, such as a routine chest X-ray for a patient without any chest symptoms.

As a student, hospital life in Spain was quite laid-back. The work days for students would often begin around 9.00 and finish between 13.00 and 15.00. As I was an Erasmus student, often the doctors would give me the freedom to make my own schedule – I could arrive whenever I wanted and leave whenever I wanted. While this freedom was often enjoyable, the Spanish system also had some drawbacks. The main one was that students often have a more passive role than we are used to in the UK. As a final year student in Manchester, I often felt that I had a sense of purpose on the wards, patients to clerk, jobs to do, or doctors to shadow. During my student assistantship I had been treated like a Junior Doctor. In Spain, students are usually only expected to shadow the doctors.

Another negative difference was the lack of feedback. When signing of our placements, most supervisors would not give any actual feedback, even when directly asked to. They did not feel comfortable giving constructive criticism. When signing me off, they were often willing to sign my forms, but no more than that. As my final portfolio review was looming, I was looking for as much feedback as possible. Following advice from my academic advisor, I ended up using any piece of informal feedback I could get to form my action plans.

However, some of the cultural differences between the UK and Spain were positive. As staff was very laid back, I would often feel more welcome on the wards, and more comfortable shadowing doctors. While in the UK (especially during the earlier clinical years) I had often felt like a nuisance, getting in the way of some of the doctors I was shadowing, almost all Spanish doctors would welcome my presence.

- Spanish Culture

The laid back Spanish attitude was reflected in the hospital schedule. For instance, as mentioned previously, a full work day might begin at 9.00 (8.00 in certain specialties) and finish at 15.00. However, often this schedule might include one, or several, coffee or breakfast breaks. After 15.00 the normal work day would finish and the on-call *guardia* would take over. It would often be considered rare for a student to be present for the whole work day. Most often the Spanish students would show up some time between 9.30 and 10.30 after their morning lectures and head home as soon as possible. As we did not have these morning lectures, showing up promptly for 9.00 every day was a good way to show that one was a serious student and to bond with the medical team.

Being an Erasmus student meant that no-one really seemed to know what was expected of us. As we were clinically based, we were not expected to go to lectures like the rest of the Spanish students. This may have been for the best as Autonoma University is located outside of the city centre, so getting there and back would be both time-consuming and additionally expensive. However, having this different schedule meant that it was more difficult to integrate with the Spanish students. They were often in hospital less than we were, and they did not seem very keen to socialise. The Spanish doctors, on the other hand, were often friendlier.

The relaxed attitude is also present outside of hospital. Efficiency is not always a priority, and often seems secondary to having a nice siesta. Many shops, even supermarkets such as Lidl might have opening hours such as 9.30-13.30 and 15.00-22.00. Depending on the time of day, errands such as sending a letter from the post office (which you might have to do if you need to fill out any of your F1 paperwork while in Spain, as I did) may take up to a couple of hours. When I first arrived to Spain I found this lack of efficiency very frustrating. However, over time I learned to accept that this is how life works here – it made for a much more relaxing experience.

That Spanish life sometimes moves a bit slower is evident in the difference in night-life. During our first week we were invited to a medics' fancy dress night at a club by some of our Madrileño friends who had done their Erasmus in Manchester. We made plans to meet them in the club and headed out at around midnight, after having some pre-drinks. Much to our surprise, not only had our local friends not arrived, but no-one else in the club was in costume. Our local friends (and the rest of the costumed medics) ended up arriving at 3am, when I was already ready to go home.



In the UK, a standard night out might consist of pre-drinks starting at roughly 20.00 or 21.00. This usually lasts until people decide to go out to a club, usually sometime between 23.00 and midnight. In Spain, perhaps due to the siesta, things are usually delayed by a few hours. Oftentimes the pre-drinking might not start till 23.00 or 00.00, and the concept of going out before midnight is unheard of. The Spaniards might not start arrive to the club until around one or two am, and they often stay out till 6 in the morning. A Spanish after-party tends to involve getting brunch.

4: *The Spanish attitude regarding nights out*

While I enjoyed Spanish cuisine immensely during my placement, there is one aspect that is worth mentioning. Spain is not a great place to be a vegetarian. I remember going for tapas with some of my fellow Erasmus students, one of whom is a vegetarian. He ordered a vegetable salad, which arrived consisting of lettuce, tomatoes, eggs, ham and tuna. There are often only a handful of vegetarian items on a typical Spanish menu, and it may be worth to double check that it actually is vegetarian prior to ordering it.

○ Travelling

During the EO placement, I wanted to ensure that I could see as much of Madrid and Spain as possible. As such, I went on several day trips to nearby cities. My three favourite places to visit as a day trip from Madrid were the following:

- Salamanca – Spain's oldest student city, with the fourth oldest university in the western world. An absolutely stunning city with gorgeous architecture. If you decide to visit for more than a day you can enjoy some of its famous nightlife.
- Segovia – Containing Spain's most important remnant of Roman architecture, the Segovia Aqueduct, as well as plenty of other beautiful architecture, I would highly recommend visiting Segovia. If you are a meat eater, you might enjoy trying the local dish: cochinillo asado, which is a roast suckling pig.
- Toledo – A city with a rich history of coexistence between Christians, Jews and Muslims. One can see the influences of the three cultures when visiting the various sites that make it a UNESCO world heritage site.

During the EO placement we also got to experience Semana Santa, which is the week of Easter. This was an experience in itself, heightened by the fact that as it was a holiday, we did not have to go in to hospital during the week. We went travelling through Andalucia, the south region of Spain, which is where Semana Santa is said to be celebrated the most. Andalucia is an incredibly beautiful part of Spain which is definitely worth a visit. The warmer climate, the amazing cuisine and the lovely people made the trip worthwhile – seeing the Easter processions were just an added



5: *Procesiones de la Semana Santa*

bonus! During the week I visited Córdoba, Granada, Cádiz and Sevilla. We travelled by bus, train or by BlaBla Car (a very handy website where you can carpool with people who are travelling for a nominal fee), and stayed either at hostels or at AirBnB's. If you plan to travel during Semana Santa, I recommend you book things as early as possible, as most of Spain is on holiday during the week and the prices go up very fast. It is also worth noting that while travelling is incredibly fun, it is also quite expensive. Paying for accommodation, travel, food and sightseeing can add up quickly, so it might be worth to ensure that you have budgeted your expenses before heading off; running out of money while travelling can be a very unpleasant experience!

- Other aspects of living in Spain

When first arriving to Spain, all I longed for was to find some place to live so that I could start to establish a routine. As I started to settle in and the routine was established, time starts to pass faster and faster. The ever-looming return to Manchester motivated me to keep exploring, travelling and trying to look for things to break up the routine. One of the nicer breaks to the daily routine was visitors from home.

While in Madrid I had both friends and family visit me. Weekend visits were the norm, but the hospital staff were so accommodating and flexible about my daily schedule, that mid-week visits were not a problem at all. There were not many things that made me realise how well I'd integrated into Madrileño life as being able to host and show people around. It is worth bearing in mind that while this was one of the highlights of the placement, it was also one of the most tiring and expensive parts of it. Friends who would come over might often feel like they are on holiday and being thrifty will inevitably be lower on their list of priorities. For instance, they may be very keen to experience the Spanish night-life first hand, which will usually leave you very tired the subsequent day. Alternatively, they might want to try all of the different kinds of tapas at the many bars and restaurants of Madrid which, while enjoyable, eventually leaves you with a significantly lighter wallet.

During our EO placement, we had to do quite a bit of work for our Foundation Year applications. This involved, among other things, ranking our tracks in order of preference, looking over induction documents and having roughly 50 pages of paperwork to print, sign and mail back to the UK. This may seem easy, but even a simple task such as ranking your posts may become mind-numbingly boring as some Deaneries require you to rank all of the available tracks. This means looking over almost 200 potential tracks, which may be a little bit time-consuming. Some of the other paperwork

included sending copies of my vaccination history, two documents that could function as proof of address, evidence of NI number, and my driving license and its paper counterpart. All of these were not readily available while in Spain. Furthermore, the DBS (formerly known as CRB) check required me to send off, among other things, my passport. This did not seem like a good idea to me. I ended up asking for an extension on some of the paperwork, and was told to complete it and send it as soon as I returned to the UK.

I made the rookie mistake of not bringing a laptop to Spain, opting instead to rely solely on my Ipad. This was a mistake. There was a fair bit of paperwork that required a PC just for my F1 applications. Furthermore, doing things like writing portfolio pieces or even just this essay, were quite challenging on just the Ipad. If you need to use a PC you can always use a *locutorio*, which is basically a cheap internet café, although they might often be quite unsavoury. Another alternative is a cultural centre called la Casa Encendida, just off the metro stop Embajadores. At Casa Encendida you can get 2 hours of free computer time per day. While this limit requires you to plan your work in advance, it is a much nicer atmosphere than you get at most locutorios (with fewer mysteriously stained seats).

- Finishing the EO placement

There are a few aspects of nearing the end of the placement that are worth mentioning.

1. Portfolio: Much as I know that most medical students relish the opportunity to do some reflective writing during their spare time, there is a slight risk of getting distracted from portfolio while living in Madrid. My advice is to try to fight those distracting urges and allocate a certain amount of time each week towards it. I am sure that you have heard this advice before, but it can really save you having to spend your last weeks in Spain (the weeks when the weather really starts to perk up) manically typing away to ensure that you pass your final portfolio review. Getting things done earlier basically means that you have more free time to do the things you want to do.
2. Getting placements signed off: As previously mentioned, Spanish consultants might not often be keen to give you specific feedback. Furthermore, they may not ever have used Medlea before! Try to get signed off early to ensure you can deal with any issues that arise. I would recommend aiming to get signed off on the start of your last week, at the latest. For instance, one of my consultants did not understand that he had to confirm and submit my placement evaluation on Medlea. After describing how to submit the evaluation to him several times, we decided it would be best if I helped him submit the form. It was good that we had a few days to sort this out
3. Certificate of attendance/departure: Similarly to getting our certificates of arrival, we also needed to get our certificates of attendance. This is necessary in order to get the final instalments of our Erasmus grants. However, a key fact that no one had mentioned to us until our final weeks, was that we needed to print out our Medlea forms and get them signed and stamped by our supervisors in order to obtain this certificate of attendance. This meant that many of us spent quite a bit of time trying to track down our old supervisors in our final weeks.
4. Deposits: As you leave Spain, it would be good to ensure that you speak to your landlord about getting your deposit back. Some places only give you half back in cash, and bank transfer you the other half a few weeks later. While this usually work, transferring money overseas may often have both transaction and conversion fees, and you may end up with less than you initially paid. Try to speak to your landlord to find a solution that works for both of you, as early as possible.

- Conclusion

Going for a four month EO placement has many daunting elements. Having to deal with logistics, budgeting, not doing practical skills for four months, being abroad when you need to organise starting as an F1, missing out on an elective in a more exotic location, are just a few of the factors that may dissuade a student from going. However, in my opinion, the benefits outweigh the costs. Getting to spend twice as long abroad as you would otherwise means that you return having experienced far more than you could have done without the EO. Your language skills will improve dramatically. You will get to actually live in a different country rather than merely visit it, experiencing both the local aspects of everyday life, alongside the touristic. Finally, and maybe most importantly, it is a lovely way of linking medicine to something that most EO students are keen on: travelling. It has reminded me that medicine is a universal profession, and despite the differences in the way it may be practiced, a medical professional is always appreciated in times of need. Personally, it has reignited my passion for travelling, and I am already making plans to try travel with medicine again during or after my upcoming Foundation training.