

Visit to Dermatologikum, Hamburg

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I undertook a one week visit to a large private dermatology clinic, Dermatologikum, in Hamburg. It is named after the 19th century dermatology clinic founded by Unna, who originated from Hamburg. The clinic employs 40 doctors across the subspecialty areas of medical dermatology, surgical dermatology, cosmetic dermatology, phlebology, allergology and dermatopathology. They have their own molecular biology, microbiology and histopathology laboratories.

I decided that the focus of my week would be on improving my dermatopathology skills, an area of the curriculum I find interesting but also difficult to understand. I was invited to Dermatologikum by Prof. Almut Boer-Auer, a well-regarded German dermatopathologist employed there, after attending a session she presented at the EADV annual meeting on the histopathology of inflammatory dermatoses. She trained under Bernard Ackerman at the Ackerman Academy in New York.

During my week at the hospital, I spent up to eight hours a day sitting in on slide sign out of a case mix of dermatopathology drawn from in-house specimens, local hospitals and consults for second opinion from other cities. I learned to recognise both benign (seborrhoeic keratoses, solar lentigines, congenital melanocytic naevi, acquired melanocytic naevi, dermatofibroma) and malignant (BCC, SCC, melanoma) entities. I was able to build on my knowledge of inflammatory dermatoses, including spongiotic, psoriasiform, lichenoid and granulomatous patterns. There were also slide libraries available to review and I went through samples of the infectious dermatology and granulomatous boxes with one of the registrars. I also had the opportunity to observe a laser clinic, with treatment of solar lentigines, dyspigmentation, fine lines and thread veins and watched the administration of botox to treat frown lines and crow's feet.

There were several differences apparent in the practice of dermatology at Dermatologikum compared to that which I had encountered in the UK. In Germany, dermatology training is five years long and begins directly after completion of medical school. It is up to the potential trainee to approach a hospital or clinic to take them on for training and they have to fulfil certain criteria, as with the UK e-portfolio, before being signed off for completion of training. Dermatology registrars must spend at least 2.5 years in hospital providing care to dermatology inpatients, including those with inflammatory diseases, allergies and cutaneous malignancy. In contrast to the UK, dermatologists in Germany are responsible for administering chemotherapy to patients with melanoma, who remain under their care from diagnosis to death from metastatic disease. Dermatologists who complete a fellowship in allergology may be involved in administering desensitisation therapy to patients with allergies. From a patient perspective, it is mandatory to have health insurance in Germany. This is paid for in roughly equal parts by the patient themselves and their employer. It will cover attendance to public hospitals, but not private. Fortunately, a first consultation with a private dermatologist at Dermatologikum, excluding any investigations or procedures, costs a reasonable €50.

Overall, I had a very educational and enjoyable experience at Dermatologikum and feel more confident in my approach to dermatopathology as a result.