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British Association of Dermatology Elective report 2014

I chose to complete my elective in dermatology as I have a strong interest in it as a branch of medicine, but also as I felt that my undergraduate exposure to dermatology was insufficient. Especially so when considering how often patients present with skin ailments. I chose Malta as my elective location for numerous reasons, one being that I was curious to see how the Maltese people cared for their skin in the sun, compared to the Irish (who feel that they only infrequently get that opportunity!). Before I set off I assumed the Maltese would have a very conscientious attitude to sun care, but was surprised to find that it was actually quite similar to ours. The majority of people I encountered were in fact sun worshippers. The pale Maltese could be coaxed into long sleeved shirts in the summer by an insistent dermatologist, but sun cream did not seem to be high up the list of priorities! If they were to go to the beach (a frequent hobby of the Maltese) then most people did seem to apply sun cream, but otherwise sun cream did not play a part in the routine of the relentless 30 degree plus heat of the Maltese summer. This attitude is newly developed, as it used to be the fashion in Malta, as it was in most places, to be pale. In order to achieve this, ladies wore cloaks with rigid hoods to entirely shield themselves from the sun. This, I was informed by a tour guide, was worn as late as the 1960s. The fashions of course changed and not long after the 60s women who wanted to get a strong tan applied a mixture of olive oil and vinegar to their skin when in the sun.

My main aim from the elective to get a flavour of what life is like for a dermatologist, with the hope of deciding if it is a career that I wish to pursue. I also looked forward to experiencing a different culture and meeting new people with different perspectives. Additionally (and perhaps most essentially in the run up to finals) I wanted to fill what I felt was a gap in my curriculum with regards to dermatology. Whilst on my elective I had the opportunity to perform a range of practical skills that I have not had to opportunity to perform before. I used liquid nitrogen, sutured and administered local anaesthetic. I also was able to assist numerous biopsies, and I thoroughly enjoyed this hands on experience.

I was surprised to note that conditions have different significance to people who are native to the Mediterranean and so have skin which annually darkens. Conditions such as eczema can lead to pityriasis alba, which brings a whole new cosmetic element to these chronic conditions. Another difference that the intense heat brought to dermatological practice was the scheduling of procedures. The risk of infection is greater in the summer months and so procedures are postponed until winter if possible. Certain courses of medication eg isotretin are given only in winter, due to the side effect of photosensitivity.

I expected the incidence of melanoma to be far higher in Malta than in the U.K and Ireland. I based this assumption on the sunny climate of the Mediterranean; however the incidence of malignant melanoma is actually higher in the UK than it is in Malta! According to a publication by Cancer Research, the UK has the seventh highest rate of malignant melanoma in the EU. Malta by comparison has the 18th incidence. This reflects the fact that the Maltese are skin type 3 and 4, whereas people in the UK are likely to be fairer.

I massively enjoyed my elective in Malta. I saw a huge range of dermatological conditions that I otherwise simply would not have had the chance to see as an undergraduate. I learnt a lot during my 6 weeks and will now be able to recognise and have an awareness of skin conditions that I would not have before. This will undoubtedly serve me well through my career, even if my path takes me to a different speciality. I achieved my aims, and feel hopeful that I will be successful in a career as a dermatologist. Regardless, the experience will stand me in good stead during my foundation years and beyond. I am very grateful to the BAD for helping me financially during my elective.