



Sean Hawkey, University of Dundee Elective Prize/Project Grant Report



I am a final year medical student at the University of Dundee who received a grant for a Dermatology elective in Malta, during which time I took part in a small research project. Throughout medical school, I have developed a strong interest in Dermatology and have pursued many extra-curricular activities in the specialty. These included an audit looking into the documentation and adherence to surgical margins in the management of lentigo maligna, as well as writing up two case series of patients with glove-related hand urticaria and actinic prurigo, both of which have since been published in the British Journal of Dermatology. I also attended the annual DermSchool event in 2015 at the British Association of Dermatologists Annual Conference in Manchester, where I was accepted to present a poster presentation highlighting neoprene orthopaedic supports as an under-recognised cause of allergic contact dermatitis. I particularly enjoy the variety involved in Dermatology, not only in terms of the range of conditions that patients can present with but also the opportunity to practice both medicine and minor surgery. My placement in fourth year also allowed me to understand how motivated patients with skin conditions can be, and how appreciative they are when treatments are successful. Being able to diagnose a condition visually is also appealing, and I imagine it is very rewarding to visibly see a patient improving on treatment.

By completing a 4 week elective in Dermatology, I hoped to gain more exposure to the specialty by observing how dermatological conditions are managed in a different healthcare system. In order to further my research experience, I contacted my supervisor in Malta beforehand to see if any he had any projects I could get involved with during my time there. Fortunately, I was given the opportunity to assist with a project looking into whether having a personal history of skin cancer had an influence on sun awareness and photo-protective behaviour in the Maltese population. Although the incidence of skin cancer has risen significantly over recent years in Malta, little was known as to whether this translated to improvements in photo-protective behaviour. Furthermore, it was not clearly understood whether sun awareness and photo-protective behaviour was heightened in those who have a personal history of skin cancer compared to the general population. This was thought to be particularly relevant in Malta where the UV index is amongst the highest in Europe. The ultimate goal of the study was to improve our understanding of patient knowledge and behaviour, which may assist planning of future educational campaigns on the importance of sun awareness and photo-protective behaviour.

Once the project had been arranged, I took a lead role in designing the questionnaire for the study. As my time in Malta was limited, we knew that it would be important to have this completed and ready to hand out to patients as soon as I arrived. Throughout the 4 week elective, my time was primarily spent attending clinics and assisting in theatre. During this period, my supervisor would select suitable patients for me to hand out questionnaires to, specifically evaluating sun awareness and photo-protective behaviour. The questionnaires were handed out to two groups of patients. The first was a study group, consisting of patients with a history of either melanoma or non-melanoma skin cancer who was attending a skin cancer follow up clinic. The second was a control group, which consisted of patients attending a wart/skin tag clinic. The questionnaire specifically assessed demographics (age/gender/ethnicity etc.), type of skin cancer, date of diagnosis, knowledge of UV related skin damage and benefits of sun protective behaviour, as well as the use of sun protection behaviour (sunscreen use including frequency, avoidance of sun-exposure in midday hours, sun-protective clothing e.g. hats) and educational level.

During the 4 week period, I recruited approximately 100 patients for the study. Although it is likely that we will require approximately 300-400 patients before data can be meaningfully analysed, I was pleased to have spoken to so many patients about their sun awareness and photo-protective behaviour during my time in Malta. After attending a few Dermatology clinics, it became very clear to me that skin cancer was a large public health problem in Malta, making up a high proportion of cases seen. In addition to the high UV index, another important factor is the mixture of ethnicities seen in the country. For instance, Malta's population has a large British contingent who are generally more fair skinned, which may explain why the population of Malta may be at an increased risk of skin cancer compared to those with similar sun exposure in other Mediterranean countries. One aspect of the Maltese culture that did limit the amount of patients I personally recruited was the language barrier, as many of the elderly patients only spoke Maltese and not English. There were however some instances where younger family members (most of whom spoke English), were able to assist with questioning. Although the research project is still ongoing and it is too early to provide definitive results, it was striking from a personal point of view to see how poor the general knowledge of sun-protection was in some patients, and how having a personal history of skin cancer did not appear to influence photo-protective behaviour. Over the coming months, it is hoped that the junior doctors in the department will continue to build upon the data I had collected during my four week elective, until more definitive data can be analysed.

I am particularly grateful to the British Association of Dermatology for their generous support in awarding me with the research elective prize grant. This has assisted me greatly in being able to spend four weeks in Malta, during which time I have had the fantastic opportunity to further my understanding of academia and the field of Dermatology in another healthcare system. I am also grateful to Dr Michael Boffa for helping to arrange the project, and the Dermatology department at the Sir Paul Boffa hospital for being so kind, helpful and welcoming during my time there. I highly encourage any students with an interest in Dermatology to consider an elective in this fantastic country!

