



Expectations and goals

The 'journey' of my exchange started already in October 2014, when I decided I wanted to participate in the exchange programme of IFMSA. I then started to take a look at the possibilities of an IFMSA-exchange. The things I wanted to achieve with an exchange were especially to broaden my medical knowledge, to improve my communication skills with patients, to learn more about the health care system in another country and last but not least, experience some personal growth.

(First) Impression

I arrived, at the first of August, a Saturday, on Malta. I was travelling with the other person from the Netherlands who was going to his clinical internship on Malta, at the airport we met for the second time, so it was almost the same as traveling with a stranger. When we arrived at Malta, we were picked up by someone from MMSA (Malta Medical Students Association), he brought us by car to the apartment where we were going to stay for the entire month. Because Malta only has one hospital, all the exchange students are in the same city, Msida and MMSA rents four/five apartments in which all the exchange students are staying. My first impression of the apartment was, this looks good, yaay, everything was clean and quiet modern. But then I found out that there was no air-conditioning, while it was above the 35 degrees. Unfortunately there was a second disappointment; namely that I had to share my room with two other persons, the bathroom with six girls AND the total apartment with NINE others! I really felt home-sick. Everything was so strange, the language, the persons with who I had to share a room with... Luckily, three people moved to the apartment below us after the weekend. This really improved the atmosphere in the apartment, it just felt like I had more 'space' to live. So eventually we lived the rest of the month with seven people, four girls and three guys, which was a good balance.



The apartment had four rooms, two of the rooms had their own bathrooms, which were both in the boy-rooms unfortunately. Luckily the girls could also use them, and in the mornings before hospital there was no conflict about the bathroom(s). The first day I went to hospital, students from MMSA brought us to our department. I was in the neurology department, which I thought was a good choice, because one of the official languages of Malta is English. But, they also talk Maltese. With other words; with patients they only talk Maltese. This was really a big disappointment, because I had really been looking forward to questioning patients and participating actively in the conversations with patients, but I already saw these plans fade away the first day. Unfortunately, this stayed this way, except for some days, when doctors or students did translate a lot for me. Most of the times I was accompanying the doctors with their ward rounds and their out patients clinic. All by all, I think my medical knowledge did not really broaden a lot. Ofcourse I did learn new things, saw diseases I hadn't seen before, but I had expected to learn more. Besides this, I was also finished very early; I started



around eight, and was finished around eleven most of the days. This really was a pity, because I really wanted to learn more.

Furthermore I did not really do a lot of examination on patients, once or twice I did some reflexes, but that was all.

Don't expect big things...

Like I said before, Malta only has one hospital; Mater Dei hospital. This means that people from all over the island (not that the island is very big, like everyone there says; don't expect big things from Malta) come to one hospital. The waiting rooms were always crowded, just as the emergency room. The hospital was very modern and big. Doctors did not wear white coats, and did not really take breaks. They have a different kind of system for medical students. During med school all they do is shadow a doctor, and after five years they graduate and become a 'house officer' for two years. A house officer helps the doctor with documentation of patients, and other administrative things (but they do accompany the doctor on the ward rounds). After this, they can assign for a residency. This is a big difference compared to the Netherlands, because here there interns also get things to do, besides shadowing. The way they treated patients was different compared to how I know it at home. In the middle of a consultation they just pick up their phone, or go to another doctor to discuss the patient, or another doctor walks in to discuss another patient. Students are checking facebook on their phones while being present at a consultation; in the Netherlands this is really being disrespectful towards patients.

Also the insurance of patients is different compared to the Netherlands, after one month I still did not completely understand how it worked. I also learned that abortion and euthanasia is forbidden in Malta. Malta really has a big Christian community, and is sometimes a bit conservative. To illustrate; until two years ago it was forbidden to get a divorce in Malta.

Malta really is a small island, you can go everywhere by bus. There is a time table at every bus station, but the bus does not really drive according to these times. The old buildings, like fortresses, walls are not very well conserved. Although the churches are the opposite. Sometimes when we were going to visit big tourist attractions (who were recommended by tourist guides), we came there, and were eventually disappointed, because it was not as impressive as we expected. But, even though, Malta really is a beautiful island.

Social programme

The social programme was really well organised. The person in charge of this, took us out really often, during the weekdays, but also in the weekend. For example, we went abseiling, an option was scuba diving, we did a treasure hunt, we went clubbing, we visited two island near Malta (Gozo and Camino), went swimming in beautiful bays, did a barbecue on the beach and even more things.

Personal growth and perspective on the future

Before this month on my own, I had never travelled alone. Also, I had never been without





my parents for such a long time. This exchange gave me this experience, and that really contributed to my personal growth. At first, you are alone, you don't know on who you can count, so you count only on yourself. Everything is strange and new, 'surviving' in such a situation really learns you a lot. So, it really made me more capable of really taking care of myself, and even opened an option of which I thought was nothing meant for me; namely living abroad. My perspective on being a doctor did not really change. Before this I was interested in being a neurologist, and after this I still am, but not more than I was before.

In conclusion, I really had an awesome time in Malta. Maybe it was not as I expected it to be, but I did learn a lot there, and I would recommend it.

