

UK Jewish Medical Association Elective Report

This past summer, I completed a 4-week elective at Nazareth Hospital EMMS in Israel — 2 weeks in A&E and 2 weeks in General Surgery. I chose to do my elective in Israel for various reasons – One was that I wanted to do my elective in a country and region I had never been to before, to learn about a different culture and healthcare system, and another was that as a Christian, I have grown up reading a lot about Israel in the bible and wanted to visit the country to learn more about it and see the stories come to life as I explored it.

Nazareth is the “Arab Capital of Israel”, so people spoke Arabic more often than Hebrew. It also has a lot of hills. Although I come from a hot country myself and am used to the heat, the up to 40 degree temperatures meant that it was excruciating to walk outside climbing steep slopes in sweltering heat. Throughout my stay, I felt relatively safe in the city. Although the hospital was located in Nazareth “Down” which is the less affluent part of the city, I did not encounter any trouble.

In the hospital, most doctors and patients spoke in Arabic. Communication was difficult and I had limited understanding of the full clinical picture. There was insufficient time for me to master the language to a decent extent before going for my elective. However, the doctors would usually try to briefly summarise the patients’ clinical history and plans for me. In A&E, some of the conditions I saw included a scorpion sting, complete heart block, cor pulmonale and dislocated shoulders. Due to the language barrier and the nature of the hospital’s electives as more observational than hands-on experience, I was unable to get involved in as many clinical activities as I might have in the UK, but nevertheless, it was a good experience to see conditions I had not seen before.

For my General Surgery placement, one of the first things I noticed was that the department was 100% men. I was the only female there, and the morning meetings got quite boisterous at times. Nevertheless, they treated me very well and were very thoughtful e.g. the head of department would allocate trainees to explain things to me in English while the meeting was conducted in Arabic. I met a senior consultant whom I later found out was one of the top urological / general surgeons in the country. When he found out I was originally from Singapore, he told me he was previously invited by the Singapore government to train the army in military medicine and trauma settings, which I found really interesting. He piqued my interest in finding out more about military medicine and surgery in trauma settings, as it is very different from medicine in a hospital setting where we have all our equipment with us. I also observed a variety of surgical procedures such as hernia operations, varicose vein surgery, pilonidal sinus tract and bariatric surgery.

One of the biggest cultural differences I noted was communication. There appeared to be a culture of “shouting” in Israel. The other Israeli medical students there assured me this was completely normal. One of the students told me, “People often associate Israel with war. But here, the only war is in the operating room when they are shouting!” The doctors would shout when they were angry, but also when they were excited. There would often be heated debates with raised voices in the meeting rooms, and there was also a lot of shouting in theatre, especially when there was bleeding. Thankfully, no one shouted at me. This is completely different from

the UK, where I am more used to a calmer environment, and barely any shouting. However, I saw it from a different perspective, thinking perhaps they were more “passionate” about what they were talking about, and that it may mean they have different sort of relationships here as they are able to freely speak their minds with each other.

The Israeli people were incredibly hospitable and kind. Many people invited us to their homes and cooked and entertained us even if we had just met them. One of the Israeli medical students studying in Romania translated for me in A&E without me even asking, and took me on a tour around the city as he had grown up there. The doctors also treated me well and bought me Israeli sweets such as baklava to try which I enjoyed immensely.

After my elective ended, I had the opportunity to tour Israel with my family for a week. Driving was very challenging. People made illegal U-turns anywhere they wanted, and there were often cars in the wrong lane coming in our direction. Drivers also honked non-stop even when you were unable to move, which could be quite distressing. We visited a mix of religious and tourist sites such as the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Hezekiah’s tunnel, Masada, Ein Gedi, Capernaum, the Holocaust Museum, and floated in the dead Sea. In this time, I felt fortunate to be able to appreciate the beauty of the Holy Land and learnt more about the history of Israel and the stories behind significant events from the past.

Overall, I had a wonderful time in Israel and enjoyed my clinical experience and holiday there. I would highly recommend it to anyone interested in doing an elective there and would be happy to speak to anyone who has more questions about doing an elective there. Finally, I would like to thank the UK Jewish Medical Association for their financial support which made for a fulfilling elective for me.

Victoria WeiYi

Newcastle