My experience with Hippokrates Exchange Programme

I had the opportunity to go to Spain for a two week Hippokrates Exchange which I successfully completed recently (20/11/17 -1/12/17). I found the experience overall positive and learnt a lot from this meaningful exchange. First of all, I can not praise enough of my host (Dr Roger Codinachs) in Spain for his warm hospitality and guidance that he provided during my stay there. Even before the exchange, he was kind enough to inform me about the primary care where I would be based and the gave me detailed schedule of the two weeks for my exchange. This helped me to prepare myself mentally for the exchange as I knew what to expect when I begin my exchange.

The primary care where I undertook my exchange was in a town called Vic, about 50km north of Barcelona. Besides attending clinical sessions, I also had the opportunity to interact with the other GP/Family medicine doctors, GP/family medicine trainees and nurses and discuss about wide range of topics related to health care. I could appreciate a genuine cohesiveness and friendliness amongst the staff working at the primary care. While discussing about the similarities and differences between the UK and Spanish health care with the team there, firstly there a genuine shock when I informed them doctors don’t wear white coats any longer in the UK (I explained them the reasons, showed them old BBC articles about the death of white coats etc.). Furthermore, I found that the length of GP training in Spain was longer compared to the UK (four years: divided into two parts: 1. First 3 years – hospital rotations + 2 months in primary care every year 2. a year in primary care.

I would imagine more time at hospital rotations would mean opportunity to work in more specialties/departments and experience. For example in my own case, I do not have a rotation at paediatrics (I am trying to compensate that by taking courses, shadowing my paed colleagues etc.) . Had the training programme been longer in the UK, may be we would have all had to do mandatory paediatrics rotation – which I feel is extremely important for all GP trainees to have.

To my greater astonishment, I found out that a GP in Spain do not see paediatric patients!!! There is usually a paeditrist or GP with special interest/training in paediatrics at the primary care who see the children and neonates.

The nursing staffs were diligent and hard working and worked closely alongside the doctors. They were running the clinics parallelly along with the doctors as well as
performing the home visit duties. I had the chance to accompany them on home visits. I could feel and see the happiness in the faces of all the patients the nurses were attending. Many of them were long term patients of the nurses, hence they appeared very pleased with the care provided by the nurse; be it wound check and re-dressing or INR checks or any other health matters.

I found the GP consultation rooms and building structure comparatively bigger in Spain than in the UK. The number of patients covered by a primary care center were also bigger than an average GP surgery in the UK. However, the number of doctors working in a primary care were obviously more there than one would expect in an average UK GP surgery. The patients were generally friendly and despite my lack of knowledge of Spanish language, I could see from their body language and expression that they were generally happy with the doctors management plan. I could even see the doctors and patients cracking jokes at each at times (especially elder patients who had know the doctors for a long time).

Overall, I had a wonderful experience with this Hippokrates Exchange programme and learnt a lot of new things about primary health care. I would certainly recommend other trainees to participate in the Hippokrates exchange programme as it would help them learn about primary health care systems in other countries different than their own, give them the opportunity to analyze it and may be recommend/ introduce changes in their countries's own practice.