As part of the RCGP Erasmus Exchange Programme, I underwent a two week placement at the University of Istanbul Family Medicine department in Istanbul, Turkey in February 2018. I thought it would be an interesting and exciting opportunity to compare General Practice in a different country. I have been to Turkey several times in the past and have always found it to be a beautiful and fascinating country, and was eager to be able to work there in order to see how the health system operates. I wanted to see the differences and similarities in healthcare and also how it integrated.

General Practice is called Family Medicine in Turkey. In terms of training, it is very similar to the UK, with training lasting 3 years - 18 months in various specialties in hospital and 18 months in family medicine practice. In terms of working hours, family medicine doctors tend to work Monday to Friday during normal working hours.

During my visit I observed consultations with my host. I noted many similarities and differences during my visit. Healthcare in Turkey is state funded. Everyone has access to free healthcare and all medications are free. However access to healthcare is somewhat different to the UK. In terms of primary care, there are family medicine clinics in hospitals as well as primary care clinics in the community. Patients can also book to see specialists in the hospital directly without referral from a primary care physician depending on their presenting complaint. For example, patients presenting with a history of chest pain may book directly with a cardiologist. They may also be referred to secondary care from primary care like in the UK. Family medicine doctors do not see children as they book directly to see a paediatrician.

Patients presented to family medicine with a vast array of presentation and conditions. Common things included hypertension, diabetes, obesity, hypothyroidism and vitamin D deficiency. Therefore, in terms of common conditions, it is very similar in Turkey. There is a high prevalence of obesity, diabetes and hypertension, similar to that of the UK. In terms of management, it was very similar. I found they generally tended to follow either their own Turkish guidelines or European guidelines. For example, for hypertension they followed the European Society of Hypertension guidelines. One interesting case I recall was a young girl with Behcets disease which I had not seen before in my experience. After discussion with my host, I learnt other things that were managed similarly include an MDT approach in cancer care.

There were also many things that were different in Turkey to the UK. Firstly, appointment times were generally longer. Patients usually had 20 to 30 minutes for an appointment, and therefore, I felt a more comprehensive and holistic approach could be undertaken than in the UK. In Turkey, people who need a driving license first need a clinical assessment to say they are fit to drive. This is the role of primary care physicians who undertake an assessment and if everything is satisfactory they
can sign the patient off. People that want to join public leisure centres also require a check up by a family medicine physician first. In Turkey there seemed to be a high prevalence of smoking in the population, however alcohol and drug abuse is low.

During the first week of my placement, I went to the weekly lunchtime medical grand round where there was a presentation on anti-diabetic medication. Also of note was a delicious kebab wrap that was provided! During the second week I was fortunate to attend a family medicine meeting with which takes once every few months. This gave me a chance to meet other family medicine clinicians and registrars. It was an educational session where some of the registrars gave presentations including vitamin D deficiency and back pain. Also in the second week the registrars in the department also gave a talk about a brief history of Istanbul, the medical school and the hospital which I thoroughly enjoyed learning about.

In between all of this, I tried to fit in as much tourism as possible. Istanbul is truly a wonderful city. It is a huge city which has a population of 15 million people. There is so much culture, vibrancy and history and at the same time it is a contemporary city. I was fortunate to have good weather for most of the two weeks with bright winter sunshine. Notable places to visit include the Sultanahmet Blue Mosque, Topkapi Palace, the Bosphorus River, and the Grand Bazaar. I was impressed by the high quality of education, and also the services provided. Most services we have available in the UK are available there, and investigations and treatment is free. The services did not seem to be as well integrated as in the UK, however, with clinicians not having electronic access to letters, investigations and procedures unless patients bring paperwork in with them. There can sometimes be long waits for certain specialties or procedures. There are also private hospitals and clinics just like in the UK.

There is no doubt that I learned so much in those two weeks. It was a great opportunity to also meet colleagues in different parts of the world and to be able to network. I am also thoroughly grateful to my host and the rest of the team for being so welcoming and hospitable during my stay. It is definitely an opportunity that I would recommend to my colleagues.