



# Medical electives scheme report:

## Ayolola Eni-Olotu

### My medical elective experience

I carried out a 1-month elective at the Alexander von Humboldt Tropical Medicine Institute (IMTAvH), based in the Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia (UPCH) in Lima, Peru. As an aspiring infectious disease specialist, I was keen to use the elective period to learn more about tropical diseases. I had really enjoyed learning about these conditions during medical school, and I was fascinated by the microbiology component of pathology, both during my studies and during the RCPATH Summer School. I believed I would benefit from seeing the presentation, diagnosis, and management of these tropical diseases in real life. As I also have an interest in global health, I wanted to see how these conditions are prevented and managed through public health interventions, particularly in a different healthcare system. I was also keen to carry out an elective in Spanish as I had chosen to study Spanish throughout school, and during my first 3 years at university, and I wanted the opportunity to develop my Spanish skills in a clinical setting.

My timetable included shadowing outpatient clinics and ward rounds and visiting other wards for ID case referrals. Every day I saw conditions that I had only studied and never seen in the UK, such as dengue and leishmaniasis, but I also saw conditions that I'd never even heard of. Thankfully all the doctors were always very willing to explain and answer questions between patients, so I was able to learn something new every day. As I was based in a tertiary centre, this meant there were patients visiting from all over the country, from the Andes to the rainforest, so I saw all kinds of presentations. My knowledge of conditions such as HIV and tuberculosis was also consolidated, as these conditions frequently came up at IMTAvH as well.



I was also given study time in the afternoon to write up my notes and read into unfamiliar concepts and recommended useful resources by doctors at the institute. This time was crucial and allowed me to accumulate relevant knowledge throughout the placement, which helped me gain familiarity with the conditions I encountered. It was satisfying to see my own progress in recognising different diseases, and to build up my knowledge of treatment options. Shadowing clinics also helped me identify key questions for history taking when trying to narrow down the differentials, which is particularly important in a setting where there is such a huge range of potential infections. This included questions about their local environment, for example if there was a nearby body of water which would make mosquito-borne diseases more likely, what pets they owned to identify a risk of *Bartonella*, and sexual history. Additionally, I was able to visit the diagnostics labs. Visiting the parasitology lab was particularly interesting, as I had never seen the tools and techniques used to diagnose leishmaniasis and malaria before.

## Career development

I particularly enjoyed seeing how microscopy can be used to distinguish between different species of parasites, and different stages in their life cycle. This fascinating experience reaffirmed my interest in doing lab-based work, as I enjoyed how visual it is and how useful it is in finding a diagnosis. This is particularly relevant to my career aspirations as an Infectious Diseases doctor, as I can opt to specialise in microbiology as well. As IMTAvH is also an active research institute, I was able to attend academic meetings and clinical case discussions regularly. It was very useful to learn about tropical diseases and emerging research from professionals who are directly involved in treating them. To me, this highlighted the importance of listening to and working with people based in the relevant settings when tackling global health issues. The doctors at UPCH were also very willing to explain the Peruvian healthcare system to me, and how different socioeconomic factors affected health outcomes in Lima, particularly when it comes to infectious diseases. For example, I was surprised to learn the first line treatment for cutaneous leishmaniasis simply was not available, despite its high burden in Peru. Through speaking to patients, I learned about the difficulties that can be faced in accessing medicines and healthcare in



general, such as a lack of availability of vital medications in certain regions, and the need to travel long distances to see specialists. This made me realise how adaptive and holistic healthcare needs to be, to ensure the needs of each patient are met, and how much these needs can vary even within a single city.

## My learning

Overall, my elective was vital for extending my knowledge of infectious diseases, and really tied into my overlapping interests in global health and tackling health inequalities. As I was based at a teaching hospital, all members of the medical team, and patients, were enthusiastic in making sure I was learning as much as I could. I feel better equipped to recognise a wider range of infectious diseases when working in the UK, which is a great advantage as prompt diagnosis, management and prevention of transmission is key. This elective experience reaffirmed my interest in Infectious Diseases, and also gave me the opportunity to network and learn more about future opportunities I can take on in working towards this specialty. Additionally, I was already interested in obtaining a Diploma in Tropical Medicine & Hygiene during my postgraduate training, and this experience allowed me to see many of the conditions that I would be learning about in this course.

The elective period is such a fantastic opportunity to explore an unfamiliar aspect of medicine, and I'm so grateful for the joint Royal College of Pathologists and Microbiology Society Award which facilitated my time in Peru. This award made this elective possible, and I found it to be an invaluable experience. I would encourage people to pursue an elective that is reflective of who they are and their interests, as there are grants like this available to make your elective dream a reality.

