

Senior Elective at Mater Dei Hospital, Malta by Mhairi Hunter



My senior elective in anaesthetics took place in the Mater Dei Hospital of M'Sida, Malta. I organised this particular elective due to my keen interest in anaesthetics. Through work for my intercalated degree in perioperative care, I gained insight to the academics behind anaesthetics and the perioperative period. This placement presented the perfect opportunity to complement this knowledge with experience in many of the practical skills needed to excel in the field of anaesthetics.

The Mater Dei Hospital is located in the centre of the beautiful island of Malta. This is the sole inpatient hospital on the island, housing over 800 beds. My elective was largely based in the operating theatres of the Mater Dei with 25 theatres in use at any one time. The hospital offers a very wide breadth of surgical specialties, therefore provided many excellent learning opportunities for the duration of my elective. As this hospital is responsible for the care of the whole country, including the nearby island of Gozo, the diversity in patients seen was endless.

My supervisor, Carmel Abela, was a consultant anaesthetist and the head of the department. He specialised in pain management, which is an area of anaesthetic practice I am highly interested in. When not in the supervision of Dr Abela, I was allocated to theatre with another consultant, increasing my range experience. Subsequently, I was allowed to attend a plethora of interesting cases in fields such as paediatrics, neurosurgery, cardiothoracics and vascular surgery. All other specialties could be attended at request. Additionally, I was permitted to attend several ward rounds in the ICU.

Prior to my arrival, my supervisor and I devised the following objectives for the four-week block. These included:

1. Gain appreciation for the role of the anaesthetic team as part of a multi-disciplinary staff in theatre and in other areas of the hospital.
2. Acquire greater insight to the major principles of anaesthesia, including the mechanism of action of common anaesthetic agents, risks that they may be associated with, and the physiological changes associated with anaesthesia.
3. Participate in and better understand the pre-operative, peri-operative and post-operative management of surgical patients.
4. Gain an insight into how acute and chronic co-morbidities affect the peri-operative management of patients.
5. Gain better appreciation of appropriate pain management in the peri-operative period.
6. Gain knowledge on the management of post-operative nausea and vomiting.
7. Gain appreciation of possible intra-operative complications and improve understanding of the possible management these complications and emergencies may require.

8. Improve competencies in relevant clinical skills including basic airway management, cannulation, ECG interpretation etc.
9. Compare and contrast health service provision in Malta compared to the NHS in Scotland.

This placement provided ample opportunity to meet these learning outcomes, and then some. Due to the enthusiasm of the anaesthetic team in Malta, there was one to one teaching in almost every case I observed, and the hands-on experience was second to none. Throughout the placement I had the opportunity to perform many procedures, ranging from basic cannulation to insertion of arterial lines. One of the main skills I wanted to improve while in Malta was airway management. This began with supported bag mask ventilation, progressing to independent ventilation and even intubation with LMAs and endo-tracheal tubes. At first, this level of responsibility was daunting, but definitely improved my skills in the long run. Over the 4 weeks I felt my confidence and competence in practical skills improving, which was one of my major objectives for the elective.

While several aspects of the healthcare system in Malta paralleled that of the NHS, there were some stark differences. The working week is 8am-2pm in Malta, from Monday through to Saturday. While the days are significantly shorter than the Scottish equivalent, I feel that the time I spent there was just as educational. I feel I was treated as part of the team from the moment I arrived, maximising the opportunity for learning and the staff were happy to answer any questions I posed. Additionally, while the clinical resources are perhaps more limited than in the UK, the level of expertise is parallel. The anaesthetists there were experts at using what they had to maximise patient outcomes. Every day came with a new challenge, yet exciting solution.

The major problem I encountered while on placement related to the climate. Due to Malta's relative proximity to the equator, we understood the temperature would be vastly different to what we were accustomed to and planned accordingly for this. However, while on placement, a heatwave struck the island, with the temperature reaching up to 43°C. A national emergency was declared, with secondary power cuts complicating the issue. As individuals, we counteracted this by drinking copious fluids, avoiding the midday sun and use of sun cream. As trainee clinicians, we were sent to the emergency department to do what we could to offload pressure on hospital. This was an eye-opening and greatly different to any situations I have experienced in the UK.

I felt highly supported while on placement. The hospital staff were inviting from the first day and I quickly felt like a trusted member of the team. Additionally, while Maltese is the traditional language of the island, the vast majority of clinical staff and patients spoke fluent English, thus I was largely able to understand the consultations observed. If Maltese was spoken, the staff involved were happy to translate, which was very useful. Due to the size of the island, the hospital had a real sense of community within. There were a number of other elective students from around the world based in the Mater Dei, which provided ample social opportunity.