

The Commonwealth Foundation Medical Electives Bursary - 1999

Pages with reference to book, From 284 To 285

Mohammad Saeed Mahmood (Final Year Medical Student, The Aga Khan University Medical College, Karachi.)

The Commonwealth Foundation is a forum to bring people from different backgrounds, cultures, economics and geographies together and promote development collaboration and international understanding. It was founded in 1966 and is funded by a global network of governments. The Commonwealth Family. These nations are bonded together by history and form a free association committed to international co-operation and development.

The Commonwealth Foundation Medical Elective Bursary is awarded to final year medical students of Commonwealth countries to help them gain practical experience in other Commonwealth countries and help hospitals in developing countries, if they are understaffed.

Another major aim is to provide cultural exchange to the bursar, In 1999 the Foundation awarded 50 Medical Elective Bursaries. The awards are worth up to £1000 each. A selected list of countries in Africa, Asia, Caribbean and the Pacific are open for the medical elective attachments on the Commonwealth Foundation bursary.

The candidates to be considered for the award by the Commonwealth foundation are primarily short-listed by their own medical school, on the basis of the details provided by the candidate in the application form of the Foundation. The candidature for the award is judged by, the educational record, the past achievements (both academic and extra-curricular) and the motivation of the student, as well as the feasibility and the scientific merit of the attachment proposed and its usefulness to the student and the receiving institution. The Commonwealth Foundation awards the bursary to two candidates per Commonwealth country each year.

The Aga Khan University Medical College (AKU) is perhaps the only institution in Pakistan which has been participating in this prestigious program. This year's recipients have been Salima Shafi and myself; both from AKU. In the past all those from AKU, who have been awarded the honour, have proceeded to South Africa for their medical electives, but I decided to explore in Singapore. I applied to the National University of Singapore. (NUS) which offered me an elective Gastroenterology at Singapore General Hospital (SGH) for four weeks. SGH is the largest medical center in Singapore with state-of-the-art facilities for patient care and research and has a beautiful architectural layout. The elective was a great academic experience. The Department of Gastroenterology warmly welcomed me, provided me with a unique learning experience and the faculty was most encouraging with regard to my work on the compilation of a large epidemiological research project, which I undertook along side my clinical work.

My elective period was from October 4th to November 30th, 1999. An usual working day started with morning rounds after which we used to go for tea at the Housemen's Cafe. It was here that I learnt a lot about Singapore, its population, attitudes of people, medical practice and most importantly, it was here that I got the research project, which played a vital role in my electives. In the afternoons, I attended the endoscopic procedures. I also attended a number of tutorials for the medical students and these were a great academic experience. I enjoyed interacting with the final years as well as the 3rd years. There was exchange of thoughts and it very pleasant to know these future doctors of Singapore. By the mid of the first week, I discovered that I was having communication problem with the patients, since most of them admitted to the ward I was posted in were old ladies and knew only. Chinese and that too, of varying dialects. Realizing this I opted for a research project along side my clinical work. The data had already been entered into the computer, but there were errors and I was required to

“clean-up” the data. This meant identifying erroneous data and going back to the questionnaires and the patient’s records. I just had three weeks and it was a “ace against time. I not only cleaned up the data, I also analysed it, made a graphical presentation and also wrote the manuscript. The Department of Gastroenterology was most appreciative of my work.

Singapore is a very beautiful, clean, safe and efficient city with a welcoming environment and most of the population speaks English. It has a great cultural mix with 70% population being Chinese while the rest being mainly Malays and Indians. Living in Singapore was comfortable and easy. NUS had provided me accommodation in the city and I travelled daily to SGH by Mass Rapid Transit System (MRT) - an internal railway network, which is one of the hallmarks of modern Singapore. Its efficiency, cleanliness and cost and time effectiveness speaks volumes of Singapore’s advancement. Food is not a problem in Singapore and every cultural variety is commonly available. More importantly the food chains, such as KFC, McDonald’s and Pizza Hut etc. serve “Halal” meat, since the Malay (Muslims) constitute a significant percentage of the population of Singapore.

The city is lush green with temperate climate and transient heavy showers of rain. There are numerous tourist spots such as their lyxury island of Sentosa, open Zoo and Night Safari. Botanic Gardens, huge shopping malls, tall buildings and the magnificent port to name just a few. The traffic system is highly efficient and the road networks are well laid out. The city is extremely clean and well managed. But it is expensive. It is said that Singapore is a “fine city”-there are fines for everything. But this maintains the discipline of the city and makes it one of the finest in the world.

The elective provided me with the opportunity to interact with people from distinctly different backgrounds, personal histories and cultures. This resulted in the development of understanding of each other’s cultures and thinking as well as friendships as the eventual consequence. I shall cherish the friendships and the memories of the time spent in Singapore always.