Medical electives scheme report:
Ïa Robert-Montaner

# My medical elective experience

I am honoured to have been the recipient of the cellular pathology RCPath and Pathological Society Medical Elective Small Grant Scheme. I completed my elective at the Anatomical Pathology Department of Royal North Shore Hospitals (RNSH) in Sydney, Australia.

My 2 main goals for this elective placement were to explore an area of medicine not covered during medical school, as well as to experience a different healthcare system. The Pathology Department at RNSH fulfilled both objectives. Overall, the 3 main themes of my elective were the fascinating breadth of pathology, insightful conversations, and witnessing its symbiosis with every hospital department.

During my first day, I engaged in a conversation with Professor Gill, an endocrine pathology expert, as he reviewed a referral of a complex parathyroid sample suspecting adenomas. Our discussion delved into the gap of literature distinguishing hyperparathyroidism from adenomas morphologically. This insightful conversation inspired my elective project delving into secondary and tertiary hyperparathyroidism in chronic kidney disease patients exploring their morphological presentation and incidence rates. This project was an excellent opportunity to explore the diverse aspects of pathological research, including tissue sampling and staining as well as microscopy analysis and data analysis. Once the project is finalised, we are hoping to publish our findings.

Throughout my elective, I was fortunate to be exposed to various aspects of pathology, including cytology, specimen examination, frozen sections, diagnostic reporting, MDT meetings and pathology teaching. During my time with the cytology team, I was captivated by the seamless collaboration of specialties, as well as the rapid generation of preliminary results and meticulous precision involved in diagnostics post-procedure. I was particularly impressed by the “walking lab”, a mobile trolly equipped with a microscope and all the necessary equipment and stains, which perfectly showcased the efficiency and thoroughness of the diagnostic process.

Throughout my surgical placement in medical school, I have had the opportunity to observe tissue samples being sent to pathology to assess for margins or tumour type. Initially, I hadn’t fully appreciated the intricacies involved from the pathologist’s perspective when assessing these frozen sections. It was fascinating to experience the entire workflow, from the meticulous tissue preparation and freezing of the specimen to detailed microscopic examination by the registrar and consultant reporting – all completed within an efficient timeframe of just 15 minutes! The time crunch of frozen sections contrasted with specimen examinations. During my time with the specimen examination team, the most memorable specimen we examined was an ear with a query invading squamous cell carcinoma. It was intriguing for several reasons. Firstly, I had not encountered an isolated ear specimen before. More interestingly, it raised the pertinent question of the optimal method for sectioning the sample – a consideration that had not crossed my mind until then.

Another facet of pathology I had previously encountered during medical school by reading pathology reports was diagnostic reporting. What struck me the most while experiencing the behind the scenes of reporting was the teamwork and collaborative efforts, as well as the seamless ability to consult with teams across hospitals, ensuring delivery of the most precise and accurate results. Moreover, attending weekly multidisciplinary team meetings (MDTs), including lung, gastrointestinal, and endocrine, provided a unique opportunity to gain insight into the pathologist’s role; from meticulous pre-meeting preparation to insightful discussions within the MDT session. Throughout my elective, I also attended teaching within the pathology department as well as weekly grand rounds. A particular session that stuck with me was an insight into the spread of germs through sinks in the hospital and ways to mitigate it.

Overall, I really enjoyed my pathology elective at the Royal North Shore Hospital. I had the privilege of join a welcoming, driven, hard-working team where I learnt valuable lessons on pathology and beyond.