

Adelaide to Athens: an elective experience

George Balalis found a world of differences between his elective experiences in plastic surgery at Adelaide's Royal Adelaide Hospital and the K.A.T Hospital in Athens, an 800-bed tertiary teaching hospital which was established during World War II. He also learnt a lot – and not just about medicine.

For my final-year elective, I decided to divide my eight weeks into two four-week blocks. I chose plastic surgery for both blocks because of the wide spectrum of work that is undertaken by plastic surgeons, from reconstructive to cosmetic, and also because I have a personal interest in facial fractures and wound management. Half of my elective was spent at the Royal Adelaide Hospital, under Dr Katsaros, and the other half was at K.A.T Hospital in Athens, under Dr Panayiotou.

I wanted to experience the differences between health care in Australia and a lesser-developed country such as Greece. I also am of Greek heritage, and thought it would be a great time to improve my bilingual abilities and regain some of my cultural roots. After arriving in Greece on the first day of the riots, however, I definitely received more of a history lesson than I had bargained for.

Greece is an interesting country both historically and, more recently, politically. There is much political unrest, and the country is struggling financially. The structure of the health system in Greece is such that doctors either work completely in the public sector or private sector: they can not do both.

Because of this, the public doctors have an interesting system with their patients, that is partly due to the way the public hold them in high regard, and also partly due to their low government salaries. The system is called 'fakilaki', which when loosely translated means 'little envelope'. It is a 'gift' given to doctors

by patients and their families, so that they can receive appropriate care and attention while having surgery or staying in hospital. In Australia, this would be a bribe, but because of the state of the health care system in Greece, officials turn a blind eye.

My experience in Adelaide was very different to that in Athens, but both were valuable in their own right. It was great to be back in my home state, and at the hospital where I might undertake

including two free fibula flaps for a mandibular reconstruction, after previous SCC of the mandible. I also spent some time in the various outpatient clinics, where I was able to see a multitude of varying conditions and start to have a feel for the suitable treatment options. I really enjoyed my time at the RAH under the Plastic Surgery Department, and look forward to possibly spending more time there in the future.

My time in Athens was also of great value to me, and definitely a memorable experience. I spent four weeks in Athens, at K.A.T Hospital, which was set up during World War II. It is now an 800-bed tertiary teaching hospital, with over 400 doctors, and large Orthopaedic and Plastic Surgery departments. It was also the hospital of choice during the Olympics. I chose K.A.T because its plastic surgery department is one of the best in Greece's public system.

On setting foot into the hospital on the first day of my elective, I was struck by the mass of patients waiting on the ground floor for the various outpatient clinics. It was a journey

in itself to try and navigate my way around all of the patients, to get to the lift and head for the fourth-floor Plastic Surgery Department.

On the fourth floor, I received my white coat, which is customary to wear while a doctor in the hospital. I was treated as a practising doctor by patients, and so was expected to wear the coat also. I then proceeded back to the ground floor, but before visiting the outpatients clinic, ►



my internship. My four weeks in plastic surgery were very exciting, and filled with lots of new experiences. I had a lot of exposure to theatre, both observing and assisting, and was particularly impressed by the work ethic of all of the plastic surgery staff, from the allied staff and intern right up to the consultant level; everyone works incredibly hard and long hours.

I was also able to witness some operations that I had not seen before,

I followed the residents and registrars for their morning coffee and cigarette, although I don't smoke, so I just had the coffee and some second-hand smoke. In Athens there are no 'non-smokers', just active and passive smokers, because of how dense the cigarette smoke is at any restaurant, bar, club, café, and even some parts of the hospital.

After finishing at the outpatients clinic, I was able to go into theatre and assist in some of the operations. There is a different system in Athens in regard to emergency patients: one particular hospital is rostered on to accept emergency cases for a particular field, eg trauma or burns, on any one night. That means that, on Tuesday and Thursday, K.A.T was on-take for trauma patients in Athens. These were divided between the Plastic Surgery team and the Orthopaedic team, with each team performing their requisite treatment before passing the patient on.

While in theatre, I observed numerous differences between Athens and Adelaide. One of the main differences was the push towards regional anaesthesia, as general anaesthetic is

considered dangerous due to the risk of some patients not recovering from the anaesthetic. The patients all prefer local/regional anaesthesia, but this is not without its drawbacks, because in some operations effective anaesthesia can not be reached. This meant that on one occasion a man was screaming in pain while the surgeon carried out his debridement of an upper arm ulcer: a different surgical experience to what I am used to.

This is not to say the operations performed were not of a high standard, as the surgeons who operate are very competent. The level of training in Greece is of a high standard, and many doctors have undertaken fellowships in the US and England, but it is unfortunate that the health system takes away from the ability to provide appropriate healthcare. Nonetheless, it was a most enjoyable experience, and one that provided me with a broader understanding of plastic surgery practices, and an experience of another country's take on health care.

George Balalis is a fifth-year medical student at Bond University in Queensland and is originally from Adelaide.

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