

An Academic Sojourn in Vellore

Thessa Arabella & Surein Prasad
virtuelina@yahoo.com
 5th Year Medical Students
 UCSI University, Terengganu Campus
 Member SMMAMS



Thessa Arabella at the entrance of CMC Hospital

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Last summer, after much deliberation, we decided to do our electives in Christian Medical College (CMC), Vellore, India. It turned out to be one of the best decisions we had made. Located in Vellore, Tamil Nadu, CMC was founded in 1900 by Dr Ida S. Scudder and started as a missionary hospital with the intention to provide quality and affordable medical care to the poor and needy as well as being a platform to educate generations of young healthcare professionals. Even though many years have passed, they have not lost sight of their aims and goals. CMC is currently one of the top medical colleges in India and a well-renowned teaching hospital. The students who graduate with a MBBS degree from CMC are recognised to be registrable with the Malaysian and Singapore Medical Councils.

Throughout our one-month electives there, we stayed on campus at the Modale International Student Hostel and commuted to and from the hospital via the college shuttle buses that were provided. We were pleasantly surprised at how clean and beautiful the greenery and old architecture around the campus were maintained. We received a warm welcome and within a few days felt at ease with the place and fell into a nice routine.

One of our aims of applying to CMC for electives was to experience a different culture and a different healthcare system than our local setting that we were used to back home, and boy did we get much more than we had bargained for! CMC is a tertiary healthcare centre. We saw a wide range of cases we had never seen before. Many of the cases were classic textbook presentations that we had only seen in pictures or rare conditions we had read about, even some we had not heard of. Hence, it was exciting to see and experience these things in real life. There were many referred patients not only from all over India but also from neighbouring countries like Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal.



Maternal and Child Health Centre (left). Asha Education building (right) has library, labs and lecture halls

We applied to be attached to a few departments during that month as we wanted to get a feel of a few different specialties that were of interest to us in the limited time that we had. Among the departments we attended were plastic surgery, endocrine surgery, upper gastrointestinal surgery, internal medicine, leprosy clinic, and rural health. During our stint in plastic surgery, we dealt mostly with many reconstructive surgeries and burn cases. One case that remains in our minds was an 8-year-old boy with neurofibromatosis type 1, who came with a large plexiform neurofibroma that was engulfing half of his face, obstructing his vision and causing difficulty chewing. Resection of the mass was done, first round although the boy would require further resections later on in life. This surgery was not done for cosmetic purposes but to give the boy a better quality of life. That was one of our biggest takeaways during this posting, which taught us that plastic surgery is much more than just cosmesis which is a misconception that many people have.

During the other surgical postings, we were given the opportunity to scrub in and observe first-hand, some of the surgeries being done. Besides the operation theatres,



Surein Prasad with Dr Paul M.J., Head of Endocrine Surgery

we were also attached to the wards and outpatient departments. There was always a steady stream of patients with rare and interesting cases to learn about. We were also allowed to join the bedside teachings and lectures with the final year medical students, which gave us insight into their teaching system.

Another aspect we enjoyed was the fact that there were so many other international students who had come to CMC to do their electives as well. They came from over 15 different countries ranging from Japan, Australia, right up to faraway Africa. At any one time there was always a large diversity of culture and a myriad of languages being spoken. This gave us the chance to learn and appreciate all the similarities, differences and uniqueness of the many countries being represented. During the weekends, we would plan trips with the other students and travel to see a little bit more of India.

In conclusion, we had a very good experience and appreciated that the doctors and specialists were always very willing to teach us, the more interest we showed. It made us become more proactive to ask more questions and step out of our comfort zone of being passive most of the time. Their willingness to teach made learning enjoyable for us. After observing the standard of education there, we were motivated to work harder to improve ourselves and prepare ourselves to become better doctors in the future.



Friends from around the globe