

## **Recognition of Distinction in Global Health**

University of Alabama at Birmingham Heersink School of Medicine

**Clinical Elective:** Oxford University Research Elective

**Date of Training:** 06/09/25 – 08/01/25

**Student:** Charlotte Tauss

**Date of Reflection:** 08/30/25

This summer, I had the opportunity to spend several weeks in Oxford, England as part of UAB's Global Health Distinction Program. From the moment I arrived, I felt both exhilarated and slightly overwhelmed. The spires of Oxford carry centuries of history and scholarship, and the chance to contribute in even a small way to its academic life was something I never imagined I would get to experience as a first-year medical student. What I didn't expect was just how transformative the experience would be, professionally, personally, and even philosophically, in shaping the way I think about medicine, research, and the life I want to build for myself.

Although I had some prior research experience in my undergraduate degree, most of it consisted of routine tasks like feeding and dissecting fruit flies. Oxford was my first real exposure to the higher-level process of designing a research question, thinking through the methodology, and grappling with the inevitable ambiguity of experimental outcomes.

I worked closely with a postdoctoral researcher named Loren, whose interests lay at the intersection of aging, immunology, and women's health. One of her projects centered on menopause as an accelerated period of aging in women, and specifically how estrogen receptor signaling might play a role in immune aging. I quickly learned that even the most fundamental tools of research, like labeled antibodies, often fail to work as advertised. Loren had tested more than a dozen antibodies over months before narrowing down just a few that reliably bound to the receptors she wanted to study. I had never appreciated how much time and patience go into simply validating methods before an experiment can even begin.



My first task was to revive human dermal fibroblasts, which I then maintained throughout the summer. Cell culture was a completely new skill for me, one that required constant vigilance. Cell growth rates, contamination, and media changes dictated my daily schedule. I also learned how fragile research can be: two weeks of careful work can yield inconclusive results, forcing you back to the drawing board. At first this was deeply frustrating; as someone who thrives on clear outcomes and tangible achievements, I struggled with the open-ended nature inherent to research. But I was also able to experience the opposite: an experiment suggesting that age-related T cell subsets expressed higher levels of estrogen receptors. After scouring the literature and finding no prior discussion of this, it was exhilarating to



realize we might be the first to ask this question. It was a sharp contrast to the way we learn medicine, where ambiguity is minimized and we learn about discoveries that are so well-established I take them for granted. Here, we were not learning answers but creating them.

Beyond the science, I gained invaluable insight into the culture of research. Out of the fifteen people in Dr. Alsaleh's lab, only a handful were British. My colleagues came from France, Greece, Portugal, and beyond, and I had the opportunity to learn about their cultures. The lab was strikingly social compared to what I was used to in the U.S. There were many pub outings, barbecues, and informal dinners which blurred the lines between work and personal life. Our PI even brought home-cooked meals to make her team feel cared for in a foreign country. These moments reminded me that the lab was not just a workplace but a community. My friendship with Loren grew beyond the bench as I witnessed her navigate challenges with her thesis advisor, the politics of publishing, and the realities of pursuing research as a career. It was an intimate glimpse into the daily life of academia.

Outside of the lab, I found that life in Oxford unfolded at a slower, more intentional pace. Taking days off for holidays was encouraged, and people genuinely valued leisure as much as productivity. I used this rhythm to rediscover a part of myself that medical school had pushed to the margins. Almost every evening, I carried a book to a meadow or tucked myself into the courtyard of a college, immersing myself in Wilde, Austen, Murakami, and Dostoevsky. These quiet hours of literature grounded me, reminding me that I need to nurture the humanities in my life alongside the sciences. I hope to carry that lesson forward in Birmingham by weaving more moments of reflection and art into my daily routines.



Most weekends, I took the train to London, where I was fortunate to reunite with my godmother and college friends. These trips were filled with laughter, reunions, and long afternoons in art museums, one of my favorite pastimes. I lost myself in the National Gallery, the Tate Britain, the Tate Modern, and tucked-away private galleries. Just as Oxford rekindled my love of reading, London rekindled my passion for art. Together, they reminded me that a fulfilling life is not only about professional achievement but also about sustaining the things that bring me joy and perspective.

I also had a uniquely personal window into the British healthcare system after coming down with a stubborn case of pharyngitis. My coworkers introduced me to their trusted remedies, like the "Lemsips," but eventually I needed to see a doctor. Used to the complexity and cost of U.S. healthcare, I was astonished by how simple and accessible the NHS made the process. For nine pounds, I walked out with antibiotics and no lingering bills or copays. The physician used clinical algorithms rather than immediate testing, which was efficient but also, in my case, inconclusive. I later discovered I likely had mono. While I did feel some frustration at the lack of testing, the overall experience was refreshing. It reinforced for me the importance of practicing in a system where patients are never forced to choose between their health and their financial security.



My summer in Oxford was a deliberate disruption of the rigid, demanding rhythms of medical school. I left Oxford with new skills in the lab, deeper friendships, a renewed love of literature and art, and a more nuanced understanding of healthcare systems. Most importantly, I was reminded that a meaningful career in medicine must be balanced with a meaningful life outside of it. I am deeply grateful to the UAB Global Health Distinction and to Dr. Alsaleh's lab for giving me this opportunity. The lessons I learned in Oxford will stay with me not only as a future physician but as a person striving to live fully, curiously, and intentionally.