

Recognition of Distinction in Global Health

University of Alabama at Birmingham Heersink School of Medicine

Clinical Elective: Busaiteen, Bahrain, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland—Medical University of Bahrain

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As someone who prefers to enter a situation with a clear game plan and at least two back up plans, traveling alone to the island of Bahrain, still riding the high of finishing my MS1 year and with no knowledge of Arabic, felt so far out of my comfort zone that I still question how I convinced myself to board the plane. Before my elective, I wondered if I learned enough to keep up in the hospital, how unbearable the Middle Eastern summer heat would be, and whether I would make some friends with whom to sightsee. Looking back, though, having learned so much about Bahraini culture, improving my ability to care for patients, and experiencing the surprises for which no one could have prepared, I am so grateful that I got on that plane.

During my initial days in Bahrain, I got to explore the area around the university before my rotation began. I arrived during Eid al-Adha, a national holiday, so most businesses were closed. Between (amazing) meals, I became more comfortable communicating with people who primarily spoke Arabic. I especially enjoyed hearing the Islamic call to prayer for the first time one evening, echoing out from a mosque, and watching most cars pull off the road for its duration. I began exploring on foot, quickly



The illicit photo in question.

learning from locals that outside activities should be saved for the fall and winter. During one of my first days in Bahrain, the temperature reached 116° F! The biggest shock, though, occurred while walking to King Hamad University Hospital (KHUH), where I completed my rotation. Outside the front gate of the hospital, I pointed my film camera and snapped a photo—only for a soldier armed with a large gun to approach me and instruct me not to take photos of a military hospital! After my surprise abated, I decided that cultural misunderstandings are bound to happen and cannot always be anticipated, and I must do my best to apologize and learn.

On the first day of my rotation, I was taken aback by the friendliness of the hospital staff and the clear communication from the leadership of the rotation. Dr. Najji met me, asked what I hoped to achieve during my internal medicine rotation, and allowed me to spend time with him in his endocrinology clinic. Patient interactions took place in Arabic, but I was invited to read the English medical

documentation that Dr. Najj updated during each patient visit. Afterward, we discussed diabetes, acromegaly, and hyperparathyroidism, and I quickly compiled a long list of topics to study that night. After listening to residents consult Dr. Najj on a few cases, he turned to me and asked if I would like to start seeing and presenting patients, as well. I waited for his laugh, but he wasn't joking! I was so excited for the opportunity to practice my history taking and oral presentation skills.

I was interested to learn that many Bahraini medical students graduate and begin seeing patients in the hospital under attending supervision before they enter a residency program. Bahraini physicians are boarded through Saudi Arabia, so residency spots are competitive and may take multiple years to begin. I also noticed some differences in U.S. and Bahraini health system structure that I was not expecting: some outpatient clinics are located within the main hospital, with adjacent clinic rooms for each internal medicine specialty. I also noted quickly that medical decision making frequently involves many family members.



A new friend at RCSI!

After spending some time with Dr. Najj and other members of the endocrinology team, I began my pulmonology rotation. Dr. Amen and his team discussed each patient in English, then we saw the patients, where conversations occurred in Arabic. I auscultated wheezes, rales, and rhonchi, identified an aortic stenosis murmur, and got plenty of practice identifying pathology from imaging. One patient, who was present in the hospital for the duration of my rotation, was being treated for a malignant effusion of mesothelioma, and Dr. Amen spent ample time inspecting and speaking to the patient. After inpatient rounds, Dr. Amen would see patients in clinic and consult for other physicians until the end of the day. Several hectic days passed before I learned that KHUH has only one pulmonologist! One highlight of my time with the pulmonology team was during a bronchoscopy for a patient with small cell lung cancer, which Dr. Amen sprayed with argon gas to curb the tumor's growth across the carina.

After the hospital workday, I had plenty of time to explore, and to my surprise, plenty of people with whom to explore! The people I met in Bahrain were nearly universally friendly and generous: patients offered me business cards and invitations to eat together, physicians opened their homes to me, and students invited me to malls and museums. I learned that public beaches require a high degree of modesty (i.e., not an American swimsuit), but I spent a day at the Ritz-Carlton beach with Dr. Najj's family, enjoying the water and view. I toured the RCSI campus, met a student buddy, and gained several contacts that made me feel much more comfortable in an unfamiliar place. I once noted to a nurse in the hospital, "Everyone here has been so nice!", to which she simply replied, "It's because we are happy."

After my pulmonology rotation was a rotation in gastroenterology. I was blown away by Dr. Omar, a Bahraini physician who trained in the U.S. He took time to show me plenty of interesting cases in the endoscopy suite, including colon cancer, ulcerative colitis, polyps, and gastritis. One day, during an

endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography procedure, I watched Dr. Omar manipulate an endoscope, explain the procedure to me in English, *and* contribute to a hospital board meeting in Arabic all at once. Though he was exceedingly busy, Dr. Omar took time to teach me, and he unintentionally gave me an excellent example of global health principles. He explained to me that after his time training in the U.S., he took many of the good practices he learned back to Bahrain to improve the lives of his patients. For example, he instituted a colon cancer screening program that identified many incidences of cancer. I was so encouraged to meet a physician enacting global health practices that serve patients, as I hope to do one day.



Lunch with RCSI faculty and student

During my rotation, I began to hear about a military conflict between Iran and Israel. After a week in Bahrain, locals told me to remain calm, as regional conflicts occur occasionally and are nothing to worry about. I was so impressed by the sense of safety the Bahraini people felt that I truly did not worry about the missiles being exchanged for some time. I was happy to ignore the news in favor of exploring the massive malls, visiting the seaside via entirely man-made islands, and learning the proper way to order *karak* tea. However, my family and friends in the U.S. were less convinced of my safety in Bahrain.



Shri Krishna Temple, in the Manama Souq

I spent one day touring the Manama Souq, a traditional market, with a new friend. A Bahraini local, she took me for samboosa, saffron juice, halwa, and cashews. I visited a beautiful Hindu temple, and we spent the evening in the National Museum. We exited the museum to sirens blaring through the streets. We learned that Qatar was targeted by Iran, and we worried about a potential attack on Bahrain. I contacted my family, UAB, and the new friends I made in Bahrain, all of whose opinions I trusted. I could sense the dissolution of the safety felt by the Bahraini people I met. I agreed to cut my trip short and return to the U.S. early. In doing so, I felt slightly guilty; I could leave as soon as I felt unsafe, but the Bahraini citizens would have to adapt to the new pervasive uncertainty in their home. That the people I met began to feel so unsafe made me more aware of their typical sense of safety and

security.

Though shorter than expected, my elective undoubtedly made me a better physician and a more empathetic person. I chose Bahrain as my elective destination to increase my knowledge of the culture and people of a region with which I was largely unfamiliar and to learn about the characteristics of a healthcare system abroad. I have accomplished that, and I unintentionally gained an understanding of the effects of a volatile environment on day-to-day functioning. I am eager to continue exploring the ways that healthcare differs outside of the U.S. and to keep expanding my understanding of other cultures. Sometimes, important lessons are imparted not through rigorous planning, but completely by surprise.