

Recognition of Distinction in Global Health

University of Alabama at Birmingham Heersink School of Medicine

Research Elective: Oxford England, University of Oxford

Date of Training: 9th of June - 1st of August

Student: Isabela Lamadrid

Date of Reflection: 1st of September, 2025

“And that sweet city with her dreaming spires, she needs not June for beauty's heightening.”

- Matthew Arnold, *Thyrsis* (1865)

This timeless quote captures not only Oxford's beauty, but also the intellectual and personal growth it inspires. Whether under the rare English sun or cloaked in its more familiar grey skies, Oxford's atmosphere offered the perfect backdrop for reflection and discovery. Surrounded by centuries of scholarship, I found myself immersed not only in research, but also in a journey of personal and professional growth. In this city of dreaming spires, I spent my MS1 summer diving into multiple myeloma research at the Nuffield Department of Surgical Sciences, a place where knowledge, culture, and ambition converge in powerful ways.



Rooftop view of Oxford on a classic English summer day from the Sheldonian Theatre.

Building on my previous research experiences at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center and the Hospital for Special Surgery, I had the opportunity to work at the intersection of my two primary professional interests: oncology and orthopaedics. I spent my first week familiarizing myself with the existing literature, getting a comprehensive understanding of the current questions in the field regarding multiple myeloma proliferation and its relationship with obesity. Working alongside a postdoctoral researcher and a master's student, we developed a focused research inquiry that would guide my eight-week lab experience.



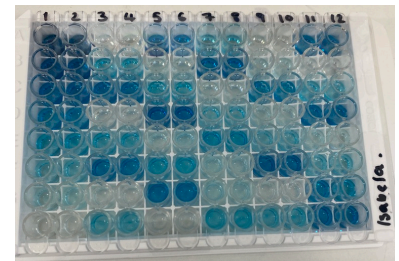
The iconic Radcliffe Camera at golden hour.

My task involved treating cultured mouse-derived bone marrow cells with resistin, an adipokine often elevated in individuals with obesity. Resistin's role in multiple myeloma is poorly understood, offering an exciting and challenging area to explore. Over the course of the summer, I independently ran multiple quantitative polymerase chain reactions (qPCR) to study gene expression, Western blots to study protein levels, and a successful Enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) on media used throughout my experiments. Although not every Western blot was perfect, I gained confidence in the techniques and understood the troubleshooting steps. By the end of the summer, I was proud to realize I had contributed incremental progress to some of the most complex questions in the field. I attended and actively participated in weekly lab meetings, where I was consistently inspired by the depth of knowledge and dedication of my colleagues.



The lab and I lovingly referred to these as my “children” for the summer (aka the tissue culture that were integral to my work).

What struck me most was the lab’s global nature. Researchers came from all over the world, united by a shared commitment to understanding and treating cancer. This spirit of international collaboration reinforced something I’ve come to value in my own research journey: diverse perspectives are critical to solving complex problems. I saw firsthand how our collective expertise allowed us to approach challenges in ways we might not have considered alone. As I move forward in my career, I intend to embrace this mindset: not just seeking collaboration, but actively fostering it, both in research and in clinical care.



A successful ELISA experiment!

One aspect of my time in Oxford that left a lasting impression was observing how healthcare systems shape research priorities and clinical applications. The National Health Service (NHS) in the United Kingdom, with its universal coverage model, places a strong emphasis on cost-effectiveness, accessibility, and population health. This focus significantly influences the way research is framed and funded. In contrast, the U.S. system, where innovation often moves quickly at the cost of equitable access, prompted me to reflect on how different healthcare models can shape the very questions we ask in the lab. During my time in Oxford, I spoke with a postdoctoral researcher focused on cost-effectiveness in cancer treatment, and that conversation deepened my understanding of how NHS’s priorities impact research in ways I had not fully considered before.



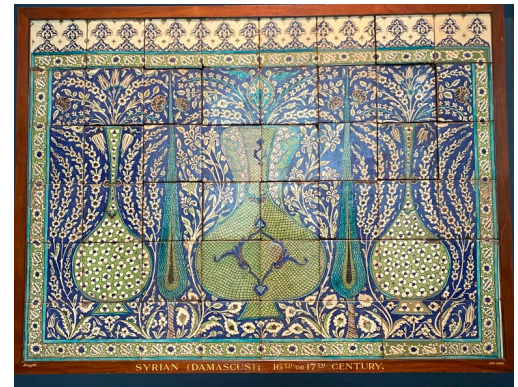
Nuffield’s staff lounge, adorned with flags from across the globe, exemplifies the collaborative international exchange of ideas.

While the lab work was central to my time in Oxford, what truly made the experience transformative were the people I met and the culture I became part of. These experiences complemented my professional journey, reminding me that the life of a physician extends beyond the clinic and laboratory. Outside of the lab, I formed meaningful connections that enriched my time in Oxford in ways I never anticipated. Many of my closest friends were DPhil (Oxford's equivalent of a PhD) students in Statistics, and through them, I found myself immersed in Oxford's vibrant student life. We spent afternoons exploring the city's hidden gems, punting on the River Cherwell (a quintessential Oxford tradition!), learning French rock dancing, and even practicing Acro Yoga in the park. As I became more integrated into their community, I even attended biweekly "Young Statistician" meetings. Though much of the technical content was beyond my grasp, these sessions gave me a profound appreciation for the critical role statisticians play in biomedical research. As someone invested in evidence-based medicine, I know this understanding will be invaluable in my future work.



Punting on River Cherwell, harder than it looks!

One of the most enriching friendships I developed was with an Erasmus+ scholar from Spain, working in a tissue engineering lab at Nuffield. We became close and spent countless hours exploring Oxford together. Highlights included having afternoon tea in a 14th-century church and wandering through the Ashmolean Museum, Britain's first public museum. We spent hours admiring the intricate prints, paintings, sculptures, and ceramics. We also explored the Bodleian Libraries and even discovered the old entrance to the medical school: a small discovery that felt symbolic of the journey we were both on as budding scientists.



A set of 48 tiles from a building in Damascus, on display in the Ashmolean's extensive Middle East gallery.



Former door to the School of Medicine at the Bodleian Old Library.



A quintessential afternoon tea complete with Devonshire cream and fresh strawberry jam.

As a long-time runner and triathlete, I also was eager to explore the British countryside by foot, specifically via trail race. I signed up for a 17-kilometer trail race in the remote village of Hambleden, about an hour from Oxford by train, three trains, to be exact. The race took us through rolling cattle pastures, lavender-filled meadows, charming villages, and a “fair few” (English euphemism for steep and many) hills. It was the most picturesque place I have ever run, and while I did not set any personal records, I didn’t mind- I was too busy soaking in the scenery. Locals were astonished I had managed to find the start line, given the lack of cell service in the area. Thankfully, I had printed a paper map: an old school, but reliable solution!



The trail race had some of the cutest medals for finishers!

Following the race, I traveled to nearby Henley-on-Thames, a quaint town famous for hosting the Henley Royal Regatta. That weekend, a women’s championship regatta was underway. I spent the afternoon by the riverside, watching the races and enjoying the lively, celebratory atmosphere. As someone who admires the discipline and teamwork behind rowing, it was awe-inspiring to witness these athletes performing at such an elite level.



The Old Bell, a Henley-on-Thames Institution, from 1325.

This summer was more than just a research opportunity: it was a time of personal and professional growth. I built meaningful connections, gained new skills, and reflected deeply on the kind of physician I aspire to become. I now understand more fully how the global nature of science and interdisciplinary collaboration will be essential in my future career. Cycling to the lab each morning, often over cobbled streets and under ancient archways, became a quiet daily ritual, one that connected me more intimately to the rhythm of the city and reminded me that growth often happens between destinations, not just at them. Oxford, with its dreaming spires and centuries-old traditions, served as the perfect setting for this chapter of my journey. I return with renewed confidence, a broader worldview, and a stronger sense of purpose as I move forward in my medical career, committed to embracing collaboration, innovation, and compassion.



Oxford’s a true cycling city and you’ll see bikes locked up everywhere, even in front of the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin.



Bridge of Sighs, an Oxford landmark.