

Medical Student Enrichment Program

University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Medicine

Clinical Elective: Taichung, Taiwan – Chung Shan Medical University

Dates of Training: February 2, 2020- March 1, 2020

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Date of Reflection: March 5, 2020

Weary and jetlagged from 23 hours of traveling, I set foot in Taiwan- my new residence for the upcoming month. Traveling alone for the first time, I was both nervous and excited. I was ready to face a new challenge armed with my rudimentary Mandarin and Google Translate in my back pocket. My fears were immediately put to ease when two medical students from Chung Shan Medical University (CSMU) greeted me in the airport. I was surprised by the hospitality I received from everyone in Taiwan, from the taxi drivers to my attending physicians.

During my month-long rotation at CSMU hospital, I spent the majority of my time with the anesthesia department. While studying in Taiwan, I was very interested to learn about the differences between their national healthcare system and what I was familiar with in the United States. I was surprised by the efficiency at which the operating rooms functioned. With so many patients to see, it was essential to have the turnaround time be as quick as possible. The whole process, which includes taking a patient to post-op, cleaning the room completely, and readying a new patient on the table for anesthesia typically took no more than 15 minutes.

Something else I had not encountered before were the differences in the pre-anesthesia assessment performed for patients who were to undergo surgery. In addition to counseling and assessing for any red flags before anesthesia, the patients were able to purchase operating room “upgrades” for an additional fee. The national health insurance covered the basic anesthesia and equipment every patient uses. However, additional services, such as using a Bair-hugger blanket as opposed to a regular blanket, or rocuronium with sugamadex instead of cisatracurium as a paralytic were among the upgrades available. It was interesting and comforting to see that patients knew exactly what they were going to be charged while they were in the hospital. This transparency built trust between the hospital and the people it served.



Through the time I spent with the medical students there, I learned that their road to medicine was quite different from my own. Many of the students I encountered were very interested to hear why I chose to study medicine. In Taiwan, students take a national exam in high school. Those who score high enough have the opportunity to pursue a six-year medicine program after they finish high school. Many of my new colleagues stated they simply chose medicine as a career path because it is a respectable and financially stable job, and they were able to pick it given their testing results. This is in contrast to the US, where medicine is often chosen out of passion and without somehow proving this passion on your medical school application, people will seldom get selected. However, even with this selection difference, I witnessed no less compassion and dedication towards patients from my Taiwanese peers.



Towards the end of my rotation, the anesthesia department director had the medical students on their anesthesia rotation prepare a patient self-reflection to discuss with each other. He explained that he had spent time abroad and saw that our medical education system often encouraged introspection—something he wishes more students he mentored did. I am very grateful that I was able to

listen to and discuss the other students' reflections with them. One in particular was focused on the strong role family has in medical decision making. She expressed her frustration about a case where a patient, who was initially amicable to a procedure, ultimately declined against medical advice after consulting with family. This patient knew it was not in the best interest of herself, but did so because it was what her family wanted and what would have made them happy. The director started implementing personal reflection into his curriculum, as he explained students here often are not encouraged to share moments of sadness. In seeing this, it made me appreciate the emphasis our medical education curriculum places on self-reflection.

As the month progressed, Taiwan began to increasingly feel like a second home. This was largely due to the wonderful CSMU students and staff I met who treated me like an extension of their family. The anesthesia department emphasized how important it was for the residents and attendings to feel comfortable with each other, and went on biweekly dinners together. They even extended this hospitality to me. Even during their busy rotations, the CSMU students would accompany me on many adventures, ranging from weekend excursions to Taipei, night



market runs, museum trips, and even a day-long hiking trip. The people who started off as my acquaintances I now consider my close friends. I am very grateful for the confidence and independence I was able to practice coming to Taichung by myself. I was able to fully immerse myself into a different culture and appreciate all the similarities and differences there are. I am truly so thankful to have left Taiwan with a broader perspective, countless wonderful memories, many new friendships, much improved Mandarin, and a few extra pounds.

Lena Zhang

