

A student exchange to Mexico

When I first heard about the British Pharmaceutical Students' Association exchange programme I was intrigued. Being able to undertake research in a foreign country and to learn about the impact of pharmacy on different cultures sounded like a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It would be something I could look back on and tell my friends about.

I chose to take part in the general exchange. This type of exchange does not require you to arrange to bring an overseas student to Britain. Although it is harder to find a place on the general exchange, I gave it a shot because I really wanted to take part in the scheme.

The application form has a list of countries to which you can travel. I chose the US, New Zealand and Mexico because I have always wanted to visit these countries and thought that it would be interesting to experience work in a country where there is no NHS.

A long wait . . .

After a long wait I heard that I was able to participate in the student exchange programme in Mexico. I was told that I was to be placed in a university in a town called Cuernavaca, about one hour away from Mexico City. I would have the opportunity to carry out research and the title of my project was: "The characterisation of new drugs from Mexican medicinal plants."

The placement would last for one month and I would be staying with four women

who were also on the scheme: one from the Netherlands another from Germany and the other two from the Czech Republic.

On my way

The day came for me to get on the flight to Mexico. I was nervous; a month is a long time to be away from friends and family in a country thousands of miles from home. After 11 hours on a plane I arrived in Mexico feeling a little tired, but at least I was there. The heat hit me as soon as I stepped off the plane and there was a peculiar smell in the depths of Mexico City, which I can only be put down to the smog and pollution. Mexico City is one of the largest and most densely populated cities in the world.

I was the first to arrive out of the group of students so I stayed in Mexico City for a few days while waiting for the others. I made the most of my spare time and visited some of the sights within the city. I went to the anthropology museum, the zoo and other places of interest. I was accompanied by the Mexican organiser who was looking after us.

Travelling by the extensive metro system and green beetle taxis was cheap and quick although the metro could become crowded — possibly worse than the London Underground! Mexico in general is a poor country, but Mexico City is possibly the poorest place that I have ever been to. On every train journey there were beggars and people trying to sell things like CDs for 10 pesos (50p). However, it is a large and vibrant city and there is culture and history around every corner — definitely a place to visit.

Why not combine travel with work experience in pharmacy? That is what Heather Holyoak did when she took part in a student exchange scheme

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Heather Holyoak is a second year student at the London School of Pharmacy

I then travelled to Cuernavaca, where the scenery was dramatically different. Cuernavaca was not as poor as Mexico City and was built in a mountain range so was much greener.

Starting work

During my first week at the university my tutor was on holiday so I was set to work on an alternative project which involved looking into the incidence of HIV with TB, and the chemoresistant strains of the disease. This included carrying out electrophoresis on patients' serum samples (separated into groups depending on the CD4+ count) and identifying all proteins involved. This enabled the differences between the groups to be identified and the variances to be analysed.

I then started work on my original project. I was based in a laboratory and was looking at the vasorelaxant effects of a plant called *Lepechinia*. I was encouraged to read some of the work that had already been completed at the university, which included a study of the antispasmodic activity of some Mexican plants on isolated rat ileum, eg, the stem of the *Flor de Camaron* (*Caesalpinia pulcherrima*), which is traditionally used for dysentery. The actions of the plants were compared with the action of papaverine.

In the month that I was in Mexico I gained an insight into how community pharmacies are run in the country. There are many differences to the way in which they are run in Britain. In Britain, people are used to receiving prescriptions for medicines that cannot be purchased over the counter. However in Mexico, most drugs are bought OTC. You can walk into one of the many chains of pharmacies and purchase pretty much anything you wish — from imipramine to insulin! You will also be hard pushed to find a pharmacist in a community pharmacy. The staff at the pharmacies do not have the same level of training in Mexico and, from what I understand, they are not experts on drugs.

Pharmacy is a new subject in Mexico so there are only a few pharmacists who work in hospitals. Instead, I found that doctors have dual roles. While I was

away I became ill and had to see a doctor. Not only did the doctor examine me but she also gave me my medicine, which would have been classified as a POM in Britain.

The student exchange made me realise that the restrictions on the sale and supply of medicines in Britain are a good thing. You cannot purchase anything that you like over the counter. It made me feel proud of the system that we have in Britain and I am looking forward to being somebody who can really help people within the community in a few years' time.

Spare time

In our spare time we managed to visit sights, including a town called Taxco, famous for its real yet cheap silver, and Xochicalco — probably one of the most important ruins in Mexico, defining part of its huge history. As well as that we hiked up a few mountains and visited the beautiful lakes and valleys in the surrounding areas — these can only be described as breathtaking.

We also visited many places of religious interest. As a Catholic myself I enjoyed visiting the cathedrals and churches, which is something Mexico has many of since it is such a religious country.

We also went to the famous Acapulco for a weekend and enjoyed sunbathing and relaxing (going "loco") on the beach. However, I did manage to get sunburnt, which was not the best experience I had while I was away.

Many a fun evening out consisted of going to Harry's Grill, where there was a club and salsa bars.

Reflection

My trip to Mexico really opened my eyes to another country's culture and history as well as giving me an insight into how pharmacy works there. I would definitely recommend applying for a place on the student exchange scheme. The trip benefited me in so many ways — I am now much more independent and looking forward to taking on more challenges in the future. ✂

More information

To find out more about the IPSF student exchange programme contact seo@bpsa.com. Further information can also be obtained from the BPSA and IPSF websites at www.bpsa.com and www.ipssf.org.