

Student exchange in Singapore



By Sonal Malde, a pharmacy
student at Nottingham
University

When I first heard about the student exchange programme conducted by the International Pharmaceutical Students' Federation, I was intrigued. Undertaking research in a foreign country and learning about the impact of another culture on pharmacy sounded like a "once in a lifetime" experience. It would be something I could look back on and tell my grandchildren about.

I chose to take part in the bilateral exchange. This type of exchange requires you to arrange for an overseas student to come to Britain. Being keen to go on an exchange, I applied in my first and second year of pharmacy but did not succeed with an offer. However, I did not give up and, to my surprise, the following year I was offered a place.

The IPSF website has a list of countries to which you can travel. I chose the US, Australia, South Africa, France and Singapore because I have always wanted to visit these places and thought that it would be interesting to work in a country without an NHS.

After a long wait I heard that I had been offered a place in a hospital in Singapore. The placement would last for one month and I would stay with my host Carolyn, who was my co-participant in the bilateral exchange.

On my way

The day came for me to get on the flight to Singapore. 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 15 hours on a plane I arrived at Changi Airport in Singapore feeling a little tired but glad I was there. The heat and humidity hit me as soon as I stepped off the plane.

Surrounded by unfamiliar faces, I searched for the placard displaying my name. Finally, I met my host, Carolyn, a preregistration student working at Alexandra Hospital.

Daily life

I enjoyed the variety of food attributed to each ethnic group living in Singapore and the excellent shopping on the island.

Singapore has fines for just about everything and its strict laws have an impact in an unusual way on pharmacy practice. For example, since chewing gum is banned, pharmacies are not allowed to sell nicotine replacement gum and therefore have to rely on other smoking cessation products. A prescription is needed even to use chewing gum for dental purposes.

Singapore is a cosmopolitan city comprising Chinese, Malays and Indians,



CLIFFORD PIER Virginia Cleveland

students years 1-3

among others. In this multi-cultural society, medical treatment varies. I was able to get an insight into the various medicines used by the different people. People can choose to be treated with modern or traditional medicine when they are sick. Acupuncture and herbal medicine are commonly practised and it both fascinated and shocked me to see how the Chinese use lizards, frogs and the characteristic serpentine blade, a traditional Malay weapon, to help cure coughs and asthma.

Starting work

In the month that I was in Singapore I gained an insight into how pharmacies are run in the country.

A three week voluntary work placement was arranged for me at Alexandra Hospital, Queenstown in Singapore. During the time I spent at the hospital I hoped to achieve two main aims:

- ▶ To observe the different working conditions in Singapore
- ▶ To observe the health care system in Singapore

In Singapore the drug cost is subsidised according to the category of the patient. Patients under 16 and over 60 are not exempt. Medicines in pharmacies are not given with their boxes and leaflets. Instead, a simpler version of

a leaflet, prepared by the hospital, is given along with the medicines. The boxes do not have “P” or “POM” to categorise the medicine. Most prescriptions are received by electronic transfer and the dispensing system is similar to that in the UK.

One of the major differences is that the pharmacists provide detailed verbal instructions on how to administer the medicines when the medicine is dispensed and spend more time with patients. Furthermore, most of the stock is kept in the pharmacy, therefore there are rarely any “owings” as the stock system is well managed.

Pharmacists in Singapore can also participate in additional activities such as clinics to assist patients with anti-coagulation, lipid optimisation, and smoking cessation issues and to assist the elderly. However, pharmacists have not started to undertake supplementary prescribing roles.

My experience allowed me to find out more about traditional Chinese herbal medicines. I visited a lecturer of traditional Chinese medicine at the National University of Singapore who researches natural herbs and plants. I learnt that Chinese herbal remedies such as the root of *Ephedra sinica* remain popular and I also got an insight into some of the traditional healing practices such as acupuncture, reflexology and massage using pressure points.

I visited a traditional medicine clinic to find out more about foot-reflexology, body massage and Chinese medical acupuncture. These can help to solve a variety of problems such as muscle sprains and strains.

Spare time

In my spare time I managed to visit some breathtaking sights. One of these was the world’s largest fountain at Suntec.

I had fun on Wednesday nights which is considered “ladies night”, when women are granted free entry to clubs and bars and allowed unlimited, free drinks.

I also got feel for the Singaporean lifestyle. Singaporeans are friendly but

they work hard — six days a week. I experienced a day as a pharmacy student in the National University of Singapore and attended a pharmacology lecture that lasted three hours!

I indulged in retail therapy on Orchard Road, Singapore’s favourite shopping street, and loved going shopping at four in the morning at Singapore’s 24-hour mall, the popular Mustafa Centre.

I also enjoyed the highest “high tea” in Singapore at the Equinox restaurant on the 69th storey of Swissotel the Stamford, being rewarded with breathtaking views as I tucked in.

Reflection

My trip to Singapore opened my eyes to another country’s culture and history and gave me an insight into how pharmacy works there. 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.

I found that pharmacy in the UK is remarkably similar to that in Singapore and the people I met, especially my host, Carolyn, the staff in the hospital and patients, were all friendly. It has helped me enhance my communication and relationship-building skills. It was also an excellent opportunity for me to use my established skills and gain further knowledge.

I believe that the pharmacy knowledge and life experience I gained in Singapore will aid me in my further studies and help me to build a rewarding and successful career. It was a wonderful, unforgettable, invaluable stamp in my life. I would definitely recommend pharmacy students to apply for a place on the IPFS’s student exchange programme.

I thank the British Pharmaceutical Students’ Association for giving me the chance to participate in this exchange.

For more information on the IPFS student exchange programme, contact the BPSA student exchange officer Niall Kealy by sending an email to seo@bpsa.com or visiting the website www.bpsa.com.