

Dermatopathology in Santiago de Chile

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Noora Takkinen got the opportunity to study the Chilean dermatopathology at PUC and also got an insight in the Chilean culture. She really enjoyed the stay in Santiago de Chile and her experiences might encourage others to follow.



I am a dermatology resident at Turku University Central Hospital. Last spring I was pleased to receive a grant from the Finnish Dermatological Society for the purpose of familiarization with a foreign dermatological unit. Since I had studied medicine in Chile for 3 years over a decade ago, I had been looking for an opportunity to visit Chile again, and was interested in finding out how I could work as a physician in Chile. Last year I visited the dermatology department of the public university Universidad de Chile, where I gained some “eye-opening” experiences, related principally to prioritization. The annual meeting of the International Society for Dermatopathology (ISDP) was held in Santiago in 2009, and to learn more about the subject I contacted the organizer, Dr Sergio Gonzalez, who is head of the pathology department of the Catholic University of Chile (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile; PUC) with special training in dermatopathology. Dr Gonzalez kindly allowed me to spend 2 weeks in his department.

Department of Pathology at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

I was provided with the opportunity to participate in the daily activities of the department together with a lovely group of pathology residents. It is obligatory for dermatology residents to work in pathology for one month, so I also had a real colleague in the department. The residents worked shifts, receiving and cutting samples, performing autopsies and attending the operation theatres to collect frozen sections. I observed the whole process, from the arrival of the sample to submission of the final report to the clinician. The laboratory was modern and the medical technologists were highly trained. The laboratory staff were very patient in answering my many questions and helping me to understand everything. I became familiar with routine procedures, such as fixing, cutting, staining, immunohistochemical staining, and preparing samples for electron microscopy, polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and direct immunofluorescence examination. I became familiar with the histopathological patterns of all common skin disorders and tumours, and studied a large demonstration collection of real patient slides under the microscope in detail, along with a textbook.

Twice a day Dr Gonzalez gathered all the residents to discuss the cases they had been working on. He interrogated the residents in detail and everyone had to prepare their cases carefully. A modern light microscope with 10 oculars was used so that we could all view and discuss the same slides at the same time. A general clinical pathology meeting was also held every day, where I was able to observe some neuropathological and gastrointestinal cases. The atmosphere in the unit was relaxed, although the professors were always treated with great respect and the working and learning discipline appeared to be very strict. Residents would help each other in every way they could.

Being a resident in Chile

The pathology residents in PUC work from 08.00 a.m. to 18.00 p.m., Monday to Friday, and from 08.30 a.m. to 12.00 p.m. on Saturdays. In addition, most of them are active in research, and they are encouraged to publish their results in national and international journals, as well as the many academically interesting clinical cases with a theoretical background that they study and prepare. Residencies in pathology last 3 years,



Fig. 1. Dr Noora Takkinen from Finland with her host, Dr Sergio Gonzalez, head of the pathology department of the Catholic University of Chile.

as do those in dermatology. Training posts are awarded in a national competition. Provision of financial support depends on individual residents; some are self-financed, but the majority have a scholarship from the Ministry of Education, or from provincial governments as payment for their service in rural hospitals or healthcare centres. One resident was financed by the Chilean navy, with the future prospect of working as a pathologist in the navy hospital.

In general, training as a medical specialist in Chile is tough, involving working very long hours each week, although for a shorter period of time than in Europe. For a foreign physician it is quite difficult to find study or work in Chile; first, because of the language barrier – everything is run only in Spanish – and, secondly, because the government regulates the entry of foreign physicians into Chile. One has to pay and pass preclinical and clinical examinations (in internal medicine, surgery, gynaecology and paediatrics) with rigorous practical tests. All the foreign residents I met were from South America. Chilean medical education has a very good reputation abroad. It is well-structured, disciplined and investigation-oriented. Traditionally, only a few public universities were allowed to provide medical education, but currently there are 25 medical faculties, most of which are private.

International meetings

During my stay in Chile, two dermatology-related international congresses were held in Santiago. I attended the 3-day dermatological meeting of Chile's largest private clinic, Clínica Alemana, where the topics discussed included parasitic and viral infections, new applications of photodynamic therapy, and the side-effects of aesthetic treatments. Many interesting speakers attended, from Chile, the USA and Bolivia. In addition, many "real-life" clinical cases were presented, and clinical experiences were shared with colleagues from other South American countries. The second congress was the annual ISDP Symposium, attended by leading experts from North and South America and Europe. The lectures were extremely interesting with a lot of clinics. I found myself viewing histopathological slides for hours without getting bored, and



Fig. 2. Downtown Santiago.



Fig. 3. Downtown Santiago.

finding that I understood a lot after all I had learned with Dr Gonzalez. I also had the opportunity to exchange ideas with dermatologist and pathologist colleagues from Paraguay, Sweden and Argentina. Surprisingly, all of them were fanatics of the Eurovision song contest, and I gained some extra points with my knowledge of Lordi – who would have believed that? I hope someday to realize my plans to visit Dr Simanaitis' Department of Clinical Pathology of Karolinska University Hospital.

Clinical meetings

My professor, Dr Gonzalez, invited me to clinical meetings with dermatologists in two different hospitals. The meeting in the PUC's private hospital was structurally the same as the ones held in Turku University Hospital: we familiarized ourselves with the background of cases, then observed, interviewed and examined the real patients, viewed the histopathology and drew conclusions. I saw cases of actinic prurigo, linear morphea and erythrodermic psoriasis. It was good to realize that the treatment would be the same as in Turku. The clinical meeting in one of Santiago's poorest hospital was even more interesting; the cases were much more advanced and complicated, and the means to diagnose and treat them more challenging – no T-cell receptor gene rearrangement tests or biological drugs were discussed. The cases were of acral melanoma, recurrent vasculitis, pemphigoid, pityriasis rubra pilaris and palmoplantar pustulosis.

My visit to Chile was very pleasant and educational. Once again I experienced the fantastic hospitality of the Chilean people and realized how highly educated and hard working they are. I am grateful to the Finnish Dermatological Society, SILY, for offering me the economic means to fulfil this dream,



Fig. 4. Empanada is a traditional Chilean meat pie.

to Dr Raúl Cabrera for inviting me to participate in Clínica Alemana's dermatological meeting, and, of course, to Dr Sergio Gonzalez for everything – for all the medical, scientific, social and cultural details he had the patience to teach me. Also, to all the residents and staff of the pathology department: Muchas gracias y hasta la próxima!