EPA Gaining Experience Programme
Observation and Reflection Report

Participating in the EPA Gaining Experience Programme at Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust was an exceptionally valuable and, in many ways, transformative experience, particularly at a stage in my career when I am still exploring my professional interests and future direction.

My interest in forensic psychiatry began during residency, when its multidisciplinary nature first attracted me. Working in this field in my home country subsequently showed me how it extends beyond clinical practice, requiring different perspectives and close professional collaboration. Knowing Britain's well-established forensic mental health system, I arrived eager to observe how these principles were integrated into everyday care.

My positive experience began before I reached Birmingham. The EPA team promptly answered my questions and provided reassurance throughout the preparations. My supervisor, Dr Vivek Furtado, arranged an online meeting to discuss my expectations and interests, and remained closely involved in planning my learning opportunities throughout the placement.
On my first day at the Tamarind Centre, a medium secure forensic psychiatric facility, I noticed Dr Furtado's collection of fountain pens. This unexpected detail stayed with me. Psychiatry invites us into people's stories, often at their most difficult moments. Although we cannot write those stories for them, we may sometimes help them discover that the next chapter can be different. The pens seemed a fitting reminder of the individuality and humanity at the heart of our work.

Following induction, Dr Furtado introduced me to consultants, registrars, specialty doctors, junior doctors, nurses, occupational therapists and other members of the multidisciplinary team. I was struck by the welcoming, peaceful atmosphere and the respectful interactions among colleagues. Questions were encouraged, and learning felt natural. As someone who values interpersonal dynamics, I found this particularly meaningful. I met people with whom I genuinely hope to remain connected long after the placement.

The Tamarind Centre's wards, named after plants associated with healing, provide assessment, treatment and rehabilitation within medium secure care. I spent most of my time on Cedar Ward, a rehabilitation ward under Dr Furtado's care, while attending clinical team meetings on other wards and observing the approaches of Dr Puri and Dr Maghanthy.

One of my strongest impressions was the unexpected calm within the Psychiatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU), despite the complexity of patients' presentations. Beyond medication, the teams devoted considerable attention to individual needs and circumstances. Patients appeared genuinely heard and involved in their care, and the therapeutic relationships I observed seemed to support their active participation in recovery. This made me reflect on how a calm therapeutic environment can emerge not simply from clinical interventions, but also from consistent, respectful and individualised approaches to care.

I also appreciated how legal safeguards shaped clinical practice. The Mental Health Act provides a framework for detention, treatment, leave and discharge, alongside routes to independent review and legal representation. Seeing these protections reflected in care strengthened my appreciation of the relationship between patients' rights and clinical accountability.
Through Dr Furtado's expertise in forensic and old age psychiatry, I observed care for a patient without a forensic history whose complex needs had made treatment elsewhere challenging. Individualised interventions, environmental adjustments and coordinated input enabled a more suitable therapeutic approach. Family members and professionals from medicine, nursing, psychology, pharmacy, social care and services involved in arranging funding and support contributed to discussions. This illustrated how much effective psychiatric care depends on collaboration beyond the individual clinician. I also had opportunities to meet patients and hear about their experiences directly.

Risk assessment and management emerged as central elements of forensic psychiatry. I observed how patients were supported towards greater independence through careful assessment, therapeutic engagement and mutual trust. Decisions about progression and community reintegration required balancing individual needs with public safety. I also learned about Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA), through which police, probation and prison services coordinate with other agencies, including mental health services where appropriate, to manage risks posed by eligible individuals. The shared responsibility and cooperation across professions were particularly instructive.

My learning extended beyond Tamarind. I met Dr Jon Kennedy at Orsborn House and spent time observing psychiatric intensive care and community mental health services. I witnessed the multidisciplinary management of an acutely agitated patient and learned about the challenges of community-based care. Dr Kennedy's clinical insight, openness and humility made the visit memorable. His willingness to explain his clinical reasoning reminded me that professional expertise becomes especially valuable when accompanied by generosity in sharing it.
At the Reaside Centre, Dr Harsh guided me through patient assessments, medication strategies and forensic procedures, allowing me to compare its practices with those at Tamarind. I especially valued his clarity in explaining clinical decisions and his genuine curiosity about other people's experiences. His approach made our conversations feel like an exchange rather than a one-way teaching experience. I also accompanied him on a prison visit, gaining insight into psychiatric care where clinical and security needs intersect.

A major objective was to understand the forensic pathway, from criminal proceedings and psychiatric assessments to court reports, treatment and ongoing management. Dr Furtado generously explained these stages through previous cases and dedicated discussions. Observing a Mental Health Tribunal hearing was equally valuable: independent scrutiny of a patient's detention brought the importance of liberty and legal safeguards into sharper focus. I was impressed by how clinical and legal responsibilities were shared across professionals and institutions, rather than resting solely on individual clinical judgement.

These observations were particularly relevant to North Cyprus, where forensic psychiatric services operate within a legal framework largely shaped by legislation dating back to the British colonial period. This prompted me to consider which principles might be adapted locally, while

remaining realistic about legislation, resources and institutional needs. Equally rewarding was my colleagues' curiosity about our own practices. In an increasingly interconnected world, such exchanges can help professionals question assumptions and learn from approaches beyond their own settings. I came to appreciate that international learning is most valuable when it encourages dialogue rather than simply the transfer of knowledge from one system to another.

Birmingham itself enriched the experience. Its cultural diversity interested me as someone from Cyprus, where different communities and histories also shape daily life. Attending a performance of Reginald Rose's *Twelve Angry Men* at Birmingham Repertory Theatre (The Rep) during a forensic psychiatry placement felt almost serendipitous. Its exploration of jury deliberation, prejudice and reasonable doubt offered a compelling reminder of how personal assumptions and group dynamics can influence judgement. As a psychiatrist, I found this particularly thought-provoking, both in relation to forensic assessments and to the broader responsibility of recognising our own biases.

One practical challenge was the cost of accommodation and daily living expenses. I am grateful to the EPA for the financial support offered through its grant, which helps make international learning more accessible. Nevertheless, costs can remain substantial for early-career psychiatrists from different economic circumstances, and additional accommodation or financial support could further widen participation. Another challenge was that I was unable to obtain educational leave from my institution and therefore had to use my annual leave to participate in the programme. These experiences highlighted how both financial and institutional barriers can affect access to international training opportunities.

Looking back, the programme offered far more than an opportunity to observe a different healthcare system. I returned to Cyprus with renewed motivation to develop my skills and explore how the principles I observed might contribute to improvements in our services. I was also encouraged by the support of Dr Cenk Conkbayir, MD, FESC, Consultant Cardiologist and Deputy Chief Physician at my hospital, who had provided a recommendation letter for my application and, upon my return, encouraged me to share my experiences with colleagues through a presentation. Dr Furtado's openness to future collaboration and his willingness to offer practical support beyond the placement were particularly meaningful, making the prospect of a lasting professional connection feel tangible. Just as importantly, the warmth and generosity of the people I met made me feel genuinely welcome, and I hope these relationships continue to grow.

Before I left, Dr Furtado gave me a desk clock. It reminded me that time is one of the few things we cannot recover, and that the people and purposes to which we devote it say much about who we are. Ultimately, what made this experience so meaningful was not only what I learned, but also the people who chose to share their time with me.

I am sincerely grateful to the EPA, Dr Furtado and everyone who contributed to this experience. I would wholeheartedly recommend the Gaining Experience Programme to colleagues wishing to broaden their perspectives and discover psychiatry beyond their usual practice.






Tamarind
Centre

