

EPA GAINING EXPERIENCE PROGRAMME REPORT

On the observership visit at the “Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Dept. of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy”

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REPORT:

As part of the EPA Gaining Experience Programme I was honoured to be able to spend three weeks at the Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, Ludwig-Maximilians University (LMU), in Munich. I would like to stress that this was my first visit to the mentioned Department and, without any previous official contacts with colleagues working in Munich, also my first opportunity to get to know their research programs as well as the every-day clinical practice.

As stated in the previous paragraph, my visit to LMU was intended to combine exposure to both the clinical work and the research. Although there was no official pre-arranged program for my visit, stemming from the fact that as mentioned I did not have any previous professional contacts with colleagues from Munich, it is fair to say that the observership program succeeded completely in meeting my expectations of being exposed to both clinical and research aspects of the work of colleagues in Munich during my three-week stay.

The observership experience was facilitated and supported at every step by the assigned supervisor, Dr. Berend Malchow, who was very helpful in shaping the program prior to my visit and during my stay in Munich. Communication with Dr. Malchow was very open, with him being available for any inquiries all of the time during my visit, and he tried his best to make my stay as productive, but also as comfortable as possible through offering advice on different aspects of my stay. In addition to being available throughout my visit, Dr. Malchow also did his best to facilitate contact with other colleagues from different clinical and research units at the Department, allowing me to directly shape program of my visit through that communication. When mentioning other colleagues that I directly interacted with, I would especially like to stress the contact with the coordinator of the PRONIA project, Dr. Nikolaos Koutsouleris, whose team was kind enough to physically host me in their lab during the entire three weeks of my visit. Next to being my primary focus in terms of specific research work, PRONIA team also made sure I felt welcome and introduced me to all of the little details of day-to-day work at the LMU Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy. The same can be said of other senior colleagues and psychiatry residents I met at the units I visited.

The details of my visit were with the help of Dr. Malchow primarily shaped to fit my previous and present clinical and research interests. Given the fact that I spent a year at Yale University with a research group interested in first episode and early course psychoses and still hold a lab associate position that allows me to interpret fMRI data from their research projects, as well as the fact that majority of my clinical work in Croatia is focused on First Psychosis Unit, it was a logical choice to visit PRONIA group whose aim is the research of prediction and staging of psychoses, and possible introduction of prognostic tools, using brain imaging among other different instruments. I was able to get familiarized with evaluation protocols used in the project, attend patient evaluations, and in-group discussions regarding presented psychopathology, but also seminars and discussions on the statistical and methodological aspects of the research. In view of my current research and clinical interests, visit with the PRONIA research group was extremely useful in helping widen my focus from first and early course psychoses to prodromal phase of the disorder and the possibility of possibly tailoring early intervention programs within the already existing first psychosis programs that I am part of as an attending psychiatrist in the University Psychiatric Hospital Vrapce in Croatia. Maybe even more important than the widening of the research and clinical focus was the possibility to interact with colleagues who are directly involved in that specific kind of work.

As with the choice of the research group to visit, which also ended up being the main element of my visit, the choice of the clinical units to visit during my stay in Munich was directed by my own clinical practice and

interests. Taking those elements into account (in addition to the First Psychosis Unit I work at the intensive care and the acute unit, but am also affiliated with Forensics Department, of the University Psychiatric Hospital Vrapce) I was able to visit acute unit, schizophrenia unit and the Department of Forensic Psychiatry. With the help of senior colleagues, but maybe more importantly of the psychiatry residents who are directly involved in all of the clinical work at the units, I was exposed to the every-day clinical work at the units, patient evaluations and diagnostic and treatment protocols. My involvement did not include independent work with the patients but I was free to join in and get involved in all discussions on diagnostics and treatment of specific cases. The discussions with colleagues on differences in psychiatric services and clinical practices between my home institution and the Department I visited were extremely valuable.

The presentation of my home institution was not organised during my visit to Munich, but the presentation of the hosting institution and the EPA programme is planned in the hospital I work in. Since my home institution has the tradition of asking visiting trainees and attending psychiatrist to present on their institutions and specifics of the psychiatric services and the training programs, I will be required to present my experiences from the visit to the LMU Department of Psychiatry.

I encountered no significant problems during my stay in Munich; again thanks to the help of the coordinator Dr. Malchow and other colleagues I had the privilege of meeting. The observership organised by EPA as part of the Gaining Experience Programme met my expectations and furthermore proved to be useful to me, because it helped establish contacts with a research group whose aims match my clinical and research interest, in that way opening possibilities for future collaborations and as mentioned previously widening my own research and clinical focus, but also no less importantly because it helped establish contacts with colleagues who work at similar units and with similar psychopathology. It is my firm belief that this sort of contacts can help foster more intensive communication and collaboration between different psychiatric departments and institutions in Europe, strengthening the net of European psychiatry, allowing for future common scientific research projects, but also future cooperation in clinical projects as well.