I arrived at The European League Against Rheumatism (EULAR) 2013 congress in Madrid a couple of days early. Very fortunate, given the strike affecting French airspace which began the day before the official start of EULAR and spanned three days. Between Icelandic volcanic ash, last year’s wildcat Lufthansa strike, and this latest disruption, travel in Europe can be very exciting. One stalwart group, Bikers against Rheumatism in Europe (BaRiE), arrived undaunted after a 1,600 km ride from Brussels, the headquarters of the European Community.

Once landed, Madrid proved to be an excellent host city. The convention centre, IFEMA Fiera de Madrid, was modern and ample in size to accommodate the 14,000+ attendees from over 110 countries who attended EULAR’s 14th annual congress. The central promenade between hangar-size exhibit halls provided some environmental vitamin D exposure, as well. Madrid boasts an excellent and easy-to-navigate subway system, using Bombardier-designed cars, with a subway stop just outside the IFEMA. It easily links to downtown Madrid’s museums and other cultural attractions.

The Spanish economy has experienced many problems recently, but these were not that evident to the casual tourist observer. There were some strolling musicians who played impromptu concerts for loose change on the subway. Squeegee kids have not crossed the Atlantic, but jugglers and other buskers were occasionally spotted performing in the streets at red lights. After a walking tour, I happened upon a philatelic exhibition in Plaza Mayor. I purchased a souvenir sheet “celebrating” the 10th anniversary of the introduction of the Euro common currency. Perhaps “celebrating” was not the word many Spaniards would have chosen in the summer of 2013. However, the city overall appeared bustling, dynamic, and vibrant, as well as very clean. Madrid is hoping to host the 2020 Summer Olympics, while its rival Barcelona strives to host the 2022 Winter Olympics. One hopes that EULAR provided a good trial run, logistically.

As usual, a large contingent of Canadians attended EULAR. Restaurants opening at 9 P.M. took some getting used to, but the food was worth waiting for. Iberian ham, fresh fish, and Rioja and Douro wines were some of the culinary highlights.
Scientifically, EULAR provided a smorgasbord of basic science and clinical papers covering all core areas of rheumatology, as well as pain management and metabolic bone diseases. According to EULAR President Maxime Dougdos, 3,800 abstracts were submitted, with 9% selected for oral presentations, and another 1,800 for posters. Innovative biologics targeting IL-17 and IL-23 were again newsworthy, as were further comparative efficacy trials in rheumatoid arthritis (RA), and explorations of new mechanisms of action in psoriatic arthritis (PsA). Excellent clinical reviews were featured in the ongoing lecture series *What is New (WIN)* and *How to Treat (HOT)*. Updated EULAR 2013 RA Management Guidelines were presented by Dr. Josef Smolen on behalf of the EULAR task force at the last HOT session.

Strategy trials in RA were a popular theme, particularly looking at whether disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDS) and/or biologic therapies could be tapered in those achieving remission or low disease response in the first year of treatment. Another noteworthy trial with Canadian content was the RACAT trial, presented at EULAR and published online simultaneously in the New England Journal of Medicine, with our own Dr. Vandana Ahluwalia and Dr. Ed Keystone as co-authors.

The symbol of Madrid is a bear standing up and eating fruit from a madrono tree, which bears red fruit superficially similar to strawberries. The reason these two items were chosen to represent Madrid is the subject of much dispute. The guide on my tour said that Christian forces saw the Ursa Minor (Little Dipper or Little Bear) constellation in the sky above Madrid the night before their successful conquest of the Moors, who controlled Madrid at the time. None of my online sources confirmed that. This Baer does not care, and was happy to experience Europe’s third largest city at EULAR 2013. Next year, to Paris!

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