What Do Med Students Think About Rheumatology?

At the Canadian Rheumatology Association (CRA) Annual Meeting, held at the end of February 2003, medical students from across the country came together to share their unique experiences of Canadian rheumatology as participants in the CRA-Merck Summer Studentship program (Summer 2002). An initiative to promote the field of rheumatology among future physicians, the Studentship program currently enables medical students enrolled in a Canadian university the opportunity to gain invaluable clinical and research experience working with a rheumatologist. Dr. Janet Pope, of London, Ontario, is the founder of the program and Merck Frosst is contributing $300,000 to it over a six-year period.

Here, in their own words, are the Summer 2002 students’ experiences—and their perceptions of our field as future doctors soon to choose a specialty.

Hussein Unwala, University of Alberta, Meds 2005

What did you enjoy most about the program? [I enjoyed] working with the local rheumatologists, attending their clinics and having clinical exposure to both rheumatology and internal medicine.

Were you surprised/pleased with your experience? Or was it pretty close to what you had expected? The experience was more than I [had] expected. I went into the Studentship thinking it would be just clinics that I was attending. But it turned out that I had the chance to attend teaching rounds, rheumatology consults, and to participate in a research project.

What specific skills did you learn that you feel will be beneficial/useful to you in your medical career? [I learned about] organizing a clinical research project, [saw] first hand how hospitals function, and learn[ed] about rheumatological conditions...

Do you think the exposure gained through the program was more extensive than what you would experience through medical school alone? Did you feel this experience was valuable and, if so, how? The amount of rheumatology we learn in our first two years [of medical school] is minimal (around one week total of lectures). Spending six weeks in the field of rheumatology allowed me to appreciate [this] subspecialty. I remember Dr. [Steven] Edworthy, my preceptor, tell[ing] me about an Objective Structured Clinical Exam (OSCE) that he gave some University of Calgary medical students. It was a classic case of ankylosing spondylitis.

None of the students picked up the condition because they did not ask whether the pain was inflammatory (morning stiffness, etc.) I know for a fact that I will not make that mistake in my upcoming clerkship years!

Dorothy Lo, University of Toronto, Meds 2002

What did you enjoy most about the program? It was a wonderful learning experience to see patients in the community setting, and to work with a rheumatologist one on one! Not only was my supervisor knowledgeable about disease processes and medical management, she was excellent with patients. She taught the art of medicine.

Will you consider rheumatology as a career option? Were there any specific events over the course of the program that contributed to your decision? I would definitely consider rheumatology as a career option. The program opened my eyes to the variety of cases and treatment options in this subspecialty. I appreciated the emotional reward of following patients long-term, and being able to improve their quality of life.

If you were to recommend this program to another medical student, what would you say? This program is a phenomenal learning opportunity that is different from all of your other rotations in medical school. You are encouraged to work and learn outside of a hospital setting. I gained [an] appreciation of how well some patients cope with their medical conditions [in order] to function and contribute to their communities.

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Leticia Troppmann, University of Ottawa, Meds 2005

What did you enjoy most about the program?
I enjoyed many aspects of my summer at the Ottawa Hospital. I think the best thing about the Merck/CRA grant, however, was the flexibility of the program in terms of my hours of employment, the clinics I attended, the variety of doctors and staff I was able to work with and the varied skills I was able to learn.

What specific skills did you learn that you feel will be beneficial/useful to you in your medical career?
The specific skills that were most helpful to me were:
• how to document a concise and complete medical history
• an approach to reading an x-ray; the different patterns seen with different diseases
• how to perform a musculoskeletal exam.

As the time spent with the doctors was mostly one-on-one at the beginning, I was able to learn and practice these skills with guidance, so that by the end of the summer I was competent in performing a patient assessment. I find that this level of training/preceptor interaction is not readily available in the school setting; most hands-on electives I have completed have been of shorter duration, and I have found the preceptor less devoted to the student.

Do you think the exposure gained through the program was more extensive than what you would experience through medical school alone? Did you feel this experience was valuable and, if so, how?
The exposure I gained over the summer, although focused on rheumatology, spilled over into all aspects of medicine, and greatly advanced my general knowledge of illness as it exists outside of the textbook. Prior to this experience, most of my hands-on learning had been limited to half a day per week—learning that was done in groups, with a volunteer “patient” from the community. As a result of my exposure [in the Studentship program], upon returning to the classroom I have a much better grasp of terms [and] common medications... What was previously just words on a page have become visual images associated with patients or x-rays...
The musculoskeletal block at school, completed after my studentship, enabled me to put pathology and anatomy behind diseases that I had seen and knew from my independent reading over the summer. This order of learning was excellent, and made learning the “textbook” information much easier and far more interesting.

Will you consider rheumatology as a career option? Were there any specific events over the course of the program that contributed to your decision?
I am definitely considering rheumatology as a career option (despite the financial warnings)! My experience broadened my knowledge of “what rheumatology is.” By not being limited to one preceptor, I was exposed to a broad range of clinics (community and hospital-based) and intriguing hospitalized patients. This experience enabled me to decide not only that I would enjoy working in the field, but also [to] narrow down in what setting I would prefer to work. It didn’t hurt that the rheumatologists were all so nice, accepting and willing to teach!

If you were to recommend this program to another medical student, what would you say?
I already have recommended this program to other students. I tell them what an excellent clinical exposure the program offers, I stress the skills I've learned, and I also emphasize to them that they should find a preceptor who is hospital-based so that they can be exposed to the broadest range of diseases, and be able to participate in hospital rounds, x-ray reading, observation of the surgeries related to MSK, etc.

Steven Katz, University of Manitoba, Meds 2004

The CRA-Merck Summer Studentship program allowed me to experience a field of medicine that has made quite an impression on me, and a field I probably would not have seen had it not been for the program.

Through the program, I was able to maintain and improve upon both my clinical knowledge and clinical skills, as well as engage in research opportunities. It gave me a chance to observe day-to-day medicine, and has better prepared me for my clerkship years.

I am definitely considering rheumatology as a career option; the medicine and the opportunities for long-term continuity of care attract me to this field.

If you were to recommend this program to another medical student, what would you say?
I would strongly recommend [the Summer Studentship program] to fellow medical students, as
I believe the experience was beneficial to my future career in medicine.

Marie-Josée Langlois, Université de Montréal, Meds 2005

What did you enjoy most about the program?
I particularly enjoyed the clinical aspect of the training—the opportunity to question and examine patients independently, with personalized, immediate feedback. I think that’s the best way to acquire knowledge and learn how to act [in a given situation]. It’s certainly the best way to get an accurate idea of what rheumatology is about, and to learn whether it’s a field in which one will feel at ease over the long term.

Carrying out clinical assessments of patients by myself allowed me not only to learn concepts, but to reinforce and consolidate them, and to clearly define my strengths and weaknesses in those situations, allowing me to better target what I needed to learn. [Carrying out clinical assessments] increased my self-confidence and my level of self-assurance when dealing with patients.

Were you surprised/pleased with your experience? Or was it pretty close to what you had expected?
I was enthusiastic about the multisystem, global approach provided in [the field of] rheumatology and the opportunity to treat such a wide range of conditions. I particularly liked having the opportunity to follow up with patients, and to spend time with each of them. I had an opportunity to do more than I thought I would, and really appreciated the hands-on approach.
What specific skills did you learn that you feel will be beneficial/useful to you in your medical career?

I noticed that, as a result of this experience, I became more self-assured when questioning and examining patients. It became easier to identify which factors in the history and clinical examination were important. The pathologies I saw in patients became easier to recognize, and I had an idea of the treatment that would be suggested. In short, I advanced in my medical training.

I also had an opportunity to become exposed to the practice methods of several rheumatologists, who made a point to teach me concepts and take time to really explain things to me. I was, thus, able to observe different approaches to patients, different points of view and different infiltration techniques. The fact that each rheumatologist emphasized certain concepts provided me with a wider range of practice possibilities.

Over and above the knowledge and skills I acquired, however, my preceptor and the other rheumatologists with whom I was fortunate enough to work with were models of compassion, attentiveness, support and availability to their patients. In a world where everything goes too fast, I found it comforting to see that medicine can be practiced in a warm, human manner.

Do you think the exposure gained through the program was more extensive than what you would experience through medical school alone? Did you feel this experience was valuable and, if so, how?

In my studentship, I had a chance to be exposed to daily practice, clinical research and a hospital environment. Externs and residents do not have such opportunities during their rheumatology rotation. They only have hospital experience, which is very different from following up with outpatients. Hospitalized cases are often more complex and may involve rare or unusual cases rather than the norm seen in practice today. As part of daily practice at the Montreal Rheumatology Institute, I saw a great number of patients, and palpated innumerable cases of synovitis, which took as many forms as there were individual patients. This experience was of inestimable value, because ordinarily one can learn the theory about synovitis and still not be able to recognize it in practice; but when one has seen a great number of such cases, it is easier to retain the related theory. When you are able to see and listen to patients, palpate them, etc., you memorize the experience spontaneously, and the more theoretical knowledge linked to that experience (such as the histological nature of a rheumatoid nodule) will remain fixed in your memory because of the clinical experience.

This type of program teaches many things, but it will also have an impact on my future medical training because the clinical program increased my motivation and has directed my studies toward relevant, clinical matters—which will certainly have an impact on my ability to treat my patients effectively.

Will you consider rheumatology as a career option? Were there any specific events over the course of the program that contributed to your decision?

Definitely! Rheumatology is now my first career choice. I am presently ending my preclinical training and I plan to begin my externship next summer. I hope to integrate rheumatology into my clinical training—something that I would certainly not have thought about before the studentship program.

I realize that I knew relatively little about this medical specialty, and find that I am definitely interested in this field. I enjoyed daily outpatient practice as well as the challenges presented by hospitalized patients. [Rheumatology] is a very stimulating and varied field of practice, with multisystem involvement and exciting advances now being made in methods of treatment. For me, therefore, rheumatology is clearly an area of specialization in which I am seriously interested.

If you were to recommend this program to another medical student, what would you say?

I would recommend this program to any medical student without hesitation, particularly to those who show an interest in internal medicine.

Rheumatology is too often overlooked when people consider internal-medicine specialties. When people speak about “exciting medical practice,” you get a picture of a doctor resuscitating a patient—defibrillator to the fore! What people do not know is that there are exciting challenges to be met in rheumatology. This program opened my eyes to a broad, stimulating field of practice, which I warmly recommend.
Mark Puglia, University of Ottawa, Meds 2004

What did you enjoy most about the program?
The hands-on patient contact and responsibility as well as getting to work with a great supervisor—Dr. Adachi.

Were you surprised/pleased with your experience, or was it pretty close to what you had expected?
I was pleasantly surprised with how interesting rheumatology actually is. The freedom to do clinical and/or research was a plus.

What specific skills did you learn that you feel will be beneficial/useful to you in your medical career?
I learned people skills (i.e., the ability to interact comfortably with patients), interviewing and physical examination skills [that] will continue to serve me throughout my career. I was also given the opportunity to perform intra-articular injections.

Do you think the exposure gained through the program was more extensive than what you would experience through medical school alone? Did you feel this experience was valuable and, if so, how?
I do not believe that any particular clerkship rotation affords the student the opportunity to work one-on-one with a single preceptor like this studentship [does]. This studentship allowed for continuity of care since it was seven weeks long (in my case). This is not something that many med students can gain from clinical clerkship.

Will you consider rheumatology as a career option?
Yes... among other internal-medicine specialties. I enjoyed the patient population, the continuity of care, the prospect of using new and exciting biologics, the opportunity for research and the lifestyle of the typical rheumatologist.

If you were to recommend this program to another medical student, what would you say?
It's a great way to hone your history and physical-examination skills. And who knows, you just might find that rheumatology is the right specialty for you. Oh, and did I mention that you get paid for learning?!!

Natalie Briscoe, University of Ottawa, Meds 2005

What did you enjoy most about the program?
[I enjoyed] the experience [I gained] in clinical-skills development: learning how to do a musculoskeletal examination, improving my ability to interpret x-rays of various joints, becoming familiarized with the brand names of common drugs and their mechanisms, [and] insights [I gained] into the business aspects of community rheumatology.

Were you surprised/pleased with your experience, or was it pretty close to what you had expected?
I was surprised with my experience, although I saw a lot more chronic-pain patients with fibromyalgia, chronic back pain, and knee osteoarthritis secondary to obesity than I had expected. I didn’t do a lot of procedures, but it is hard to do these in the daily fast-paced office of a community rheumatologist.

What specific skills did you learn that you feel will be beneficial/useful to you in your medical career?
[I learned] how to take a history, do a physical exam, how to elicit reflexes, and how to feel joint spaces, synovial thickening [and] synovitis. [I also] practiced taking blood pressure, and became very good at judging joint angles and integrating history and physical into a diagnosis. [I] learned more about the pharmaceutical industry, and how the expense of drugs such as [infliximab and etanercept] are limited to a select few who can afford [them] or are eligible for the Trillium drug benefits.

Do you think the exposure gained through the program was more extensive than what you would experience through medical school alone? Did you feel this experience was valuable and, if so, how?
The experience I had over the summer was invaluable, and was definitely more extensive than what I would have experienced in medical school alone. It had all the interaction with patients and hands-on physical examination practice, without the stress of clerkship and evaluation.

Valuable points:
• Spending three months solely working in one specialty allowed [me] to see follow-up on the same patients, and seeing the same condition
repeated times (with the various presentations afforded to the unique patient profile) [was also beneficial].

- I had one-on-one [time] with a physician who became like a mentor; the feedback was excellent
- I gained confidence in interacting with office staff/patients/other physicians and became more fluent at reading charts.

**Will you consider rheumatology as a career option?**

**Were there any specific events over the course of the program that contributed to your decision?**

No, I will not likely consider rheumatology as a career option for the following reasons:

1. The specialty is underpaid, and the rheumatologists had to work really hard to make a decent living in the face of overhead.
2. The profession is currently glutted with chronic-pain patients who are not only mentally exhausting to deal with, but are also incredibly hard to treat.
3. The new biologic agents are being withheld from a great number of patients whose joints are continually degenerating, and I have personally witnessed the daily battle of paperwork that the rheumatologists do to Section 8 (unpaid) on behalf of their patients, [only to] get rejected for not pushing a more liver-toxic agent, like leflunomide...first.

**If you were to recommend this program to another medical student, what would you say?**

[I would say] that it’s a great clinical experience, granting interpersonal skills and allowing for self-development of physical examination skills and the ability to empathize with...patients.

**Darren Gumbs, University of Alberta, Meds 2004**

**What did you enjoy most about the program?**

[What] I enjoyed most about this program was being exposed to the clinical practice of rheumatologists. I was given the opportunity to do full histories and physicals, as well as some procedures (knee-joint injection, subacromial injection).

**Were you surprised/pleased with your experience, or was it pretty close to what you had expected?**

My experience met my expectations of the program.

**What specific skills did you learn that you feel will be beneficial/useful to you in your medical career?**

The specific skills that will be useful [include]: joint injections, aspirations, [and] physical examination skills, as [they] pertain to diagnosing rheumatologic conditions.

**Do you think the exposure gained through the program was more extensive than what you would experience through medical school alone? Did you feel this experience was valuable and, if so, how?**

My experience was more extensive than what I could have obtained through medical school. I believe there is quite a difference [between this Studentship and the] didactic teaching of rheumatology or a brief exposure through a clinic. This experience was extremely valuable because rheumatologic conditions have a variety of systemic effects. I have already been exposed to [the] adverse effects of Sjogrens with related vasculitis leading to cerebral bleed, vasculitis, etc. Having this exposure gave me the opportunity to learn from this experience, as well as [to] add some valuable information to [my knowledge of] the treatment of such conditions.

**Will you consider rheumatology as a career option?**

*Were there any specific events over the course of the program that contributed to your decision?*

I am considering rheumatology as a career. I don't believe there were any specific events during my summer experience [that led to this decision, but] I do believe that my positive [perception] of rheumatology was reinforced by seeing the amount of rheumatologic consults during my internal-medicine rotation. The area of rheumatology exposes one to a variety of diseases and manifestations.

**If you were to recommend this program to another medical student, what would you say?**

I would tell the medical student [that], even if [he/she] were not interested in rheumatology as a career, the experience...one would gain in terms of musculoskeletal examination would be invaluable and an asset for the rest of [his/her] medical career.