

TRAINING BURSARY PROGRAMME REPORT (2019)

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Training bursary programme destination: Cliniques Universitaires Saint-Luc, Bruxelles

1) What was the motivation to apply for training in this Center? / Main objectives

I have completed an 8-week training internship at the Department of Rheumatology of the Cliniques Universitaires Saint-Luc in Brussels, Belgium. I stayed for the period from 18/02/2019 to 12/04/2019.

My primary goal was to enhance my clinical and research skills in the field of SLE and specifically, broaden my understanding on the diagnosis, management and follow-up of patients with renal involvement. Secondary goals were to familiarize with the clinical and laboratory research currently underway at one of the most recognized European institution focused on SLE and to expand my network of scientific contacts in the SLE field, which could lead to potential future collaborations. My training involved a part of clinical development and a part of clinical research.

2) How the objectives were fulfilled by the training? / Description of activities

The clinical part of my training included participation in the specialized consultation clinic of connective tissue diseases, held every Monday and Friday by Professor F. Houssiau and Dr F. Tamirou. This clinic provides care for approximately 50 patients/week, mostly patients with SLE, half of them with lupus nephritis (LN). During my stay I had the chance to participate in the care of numerous cases of patients with LN, which enhanced my knowledge on the management and follow-up of this complex manifestation and its associated complications and comorbidities. I also gained experience in other challenging SLE manifestations, such as patients with lung involvement, as well as cases of Systemic Sclerosis and Systemic Vasculitis, who were also seen during this consultation clinic. An equally important issue I witnessed during the consultations was a very well organized strategy for recruiting patients for participation in clinical studies, which required effective collaboration between everyone in the clinical team.

During my clinical training I also attended the medical ward rounds of the Rheumatology Department and participated in the assessments of referred patients from other departments. Furthermore, I participated in the various scientific meetings organized by the department, which included bimonthly discussion of complex clinical cases and a joint bimonthly meeting with the radiologists of Saint-Luc Hospital. Through these activities, I acquired a better insight on how a rheumatology department in one of the EULAR Centres of Excellence is organized and familiarized with the multidisciplinary approach of rheumatologic patients.

I intend to adapt some of the methods I learnt to better organize the clinic I currently work in Greece and try to integrate a remarkably efficient clinical research network in terms of patient recruitment.

The part related to clinical research involved the retrospective collection of data from cases with LN who had undergone repeat renal biopsy after a specific time interval. The aim of my research was to compare the clinical data of patients with LN with pathological data from repeat renal biopsies and find possible correlations between histologic findings and long-term outcomes, as assessed by renal function and proteinuria.

To this end, I retrospectively extracted information from medical charts and electronic database, using data from the long-term follow-up of the MAINTAIN trial [1] and the Euro-Lupus Nephritis Trial [2] and data from the existing SLE registry of Saint-Luc hospital. The results from this retrospective analysis will be used as a proof-of-concept for the design of a large multicentre prospective randomized controlled study. The latter will include patients with LN who undergo baseline and per protocol repeat renal biopsies after receiving induction therapy. This prospective trial, which will ultimately aim to optimise the treatment management of LN, requires a large number of patients with long-term follow-up. Thus, a proof-of-concept study is essential in order to optimize the study design and homogenize the follow-up of the prospective study in all participating centres. The results of this proof-of-concept study will be announced in one of the forthcoming international rheumatology congresses.

3) What are the main opportunities / strengths this center offers for future applicants?

The high level of professionalism regarding my arrival at the clinic, ensuring my quick settlement in both accommodation and the Saint-Luc Hospital.

- The mix of learning opportunities combining clinical practice and participation in the clinic's research activities.
- A training in Saint-Luc rheumatology department allows you to design and choose what your overall training will include while the team tries its best to help you gain the experiences you came for.
- The presence of Prof. Houssiau as a leader of an incredible multi-disciplinary team which allows you to feel as an equal member of their team.
- The observation of up-to-date clinical consultations on patients with SLE who present with severe manifestations such as LN, as well as patients with Systemic Sclerosis and Systemic Vasculitis.

4) Practical advice for future applicants to the SLEuro training bursary

The anticipated goals for this short internship have been achieved and have even exceeded my expectations. Regarding the clinical component, I was able to acquire knowledge and know-how that I plan to integrate in my clinical practice in Greece. In addition, this experience allowed me to strengthen international collaborations and to expand my network of scientific contacts in the SLE field.

My advice for future applicants would be to check on each center's website before applying, as it is usually informative regarding the department's daily activities and the orientation of the research which is carried out in their laboratory. Afterwards, it is important to contact the department/clinic before applying, in order to get a better understanding on whether this specific centre is suitable for fulfilling the applicant's goals and to make a preliminary schedule on what their activities will involve.

In conclusion, this period of 8 weeks at Saint-Luc Hospital has enriched my clinical skills with new perspectives of care and has given me the opportunity to take part in a clinical research project whose future results may have significant impact on clinical practice. It is very sincerely

that I reiterate my thanks to the SLEuro foundation for its support, which I will never fail to mention in my work.

References:

1. Tamirou F, David D'Cruz, Shirish Sangle, et al. Long-term follow-up of the MAINTAIN Nephritis Trial, comparing azathioprine and mycophenolate mofetil as maintenance therapy of lupus nephritis. *Ann Rheum Dis* 2016;75:526–531. *iseases*, 66 (2007), pp. 821-824.
2. Houssiau FA, Vasconcelos C, D'Cruz D, et al. Immunosuppressive therapy in lupus nephritis: The Euro-Lupus Nephritis Trial, a randomized trial of low-dose versus high-dose intravenous cyclophosphamide. *Arthritis Rheum.* 2002 Aug;46(8):2121-31.