

Medical Student Enrichment Program

University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Medicine

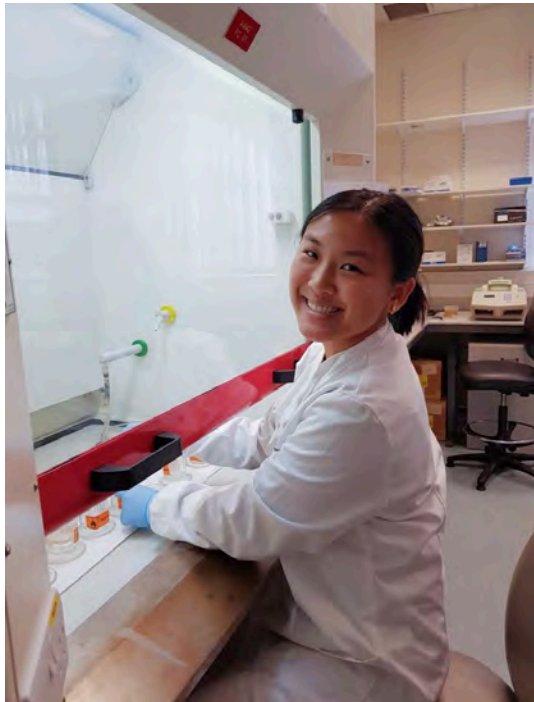
Clinical Elective: Cardiff, Wales -- Cardiff University

Date of Training: June 2, 2024 - July 27, 2024

Student: Anna Wilson, MS1

Date of Reflection: August 23, 2024

I spent this summer in Cardiff, Wales, researching prostate cancer. This was the first time that I had been out of the country, and I had never worked in a lab specifically geared toward any form of cancer research. Thus, I was both nervous and excited for what the summer would hold. Upon arriving, I was warmly welcomed into the lab, and they helped me get oriented to the lab and to the city. The lessons I learned and the people I met, both inside and outside of work, made for a summer I will never forget.



Once I got my basic training, I was able to begin the staining and imaging for my histology project. Although this project was focused on prostate cancer, many of the methods and tasks paralleled those of a prior lab I worked in that focused on neurodegenerative diseases. Once I got a refresher, the skills came back to me quickly, but it was interesting to see those same skills applied in a different context.

In contrast to my undergraduate lab, I was trusted with more responsibilities and independence. I was given the authority to make certain technical decisions for my project that I felt unprepared to make, though I see I was qualified in hindsight. I am thankful that I worked under a mentor that saw the potential in me and believed I was capable enough to take off the “training wheels” in the lab.

I had the pleasure of working with a Ph.D. student from Greece throughout my time in Cardiff. We had incredibly different backgrounds, but we both found ourselves contributing in unique ways to the project. His degree was in computational biology, so I enjoyed learning from him about how coding and the statistical software works. Although it was a little intimidating at first, it helped me develop more intuition on the image analysis we were performing. On the other hand, he had limited wet-lab experience, so I got to teach him how to perform experiments. It was enriching to have the opportunity to not only learn but also get to teach some skills.

Over the summer, I became a local at my rotation of coffee shops. Something I noticed is that none of them opened until 8:30, 9:00, or even 10:00. The later opening time there reflected a slower pace of life than I am used to in the States, and this was something I had no trouble adapting to as my lab did not get started until around 9:30 every morning. Another thing I found is that I would always be served by the same person. I couldn't walk into Bricks N' Mortar without my daily schedule because the barista, who formerly worked in a lab, asked me what experiments I had planned, and my barista from Quantum Roasters was ready to make my usual order before I even made it to the register. Although I was only there for 8 weeks, I reached a level of familiarity with these people because there was a surprisingly low turnover of employees. Both these elements made me reflect on Cardiff's attitude toward work and how pace of living is much less hurried there than in the States.

Before I arrived in Cardiff, I had no idea that I would be living next to a castle. I knew I wanted to visit it when I got some free time. Upon entering the gates, I felt like I was in a Medieval fairytale despite being right across the street from the bustling city center and only a few blocks from my apartment. I visited at least a dozen other castles throughout the UK, but few were as memorable as Cardiff's. Although the castle was breathtaking, it also has a rich history that spans nearly 2,000 years. The grounds have served many roles from being a fort in the Roman Empire to a palace for royalty in the Victorian period to a shelter during air-raids in WWII to a concert venue in 2024.



The initial excitement I felt coming into Cardiff did not wear off throughout the summer. When I wasn't in the lab, I spent every moment soaking up my surroundings and exploring the rest of the UK. Early in the summer, I visited Dublin with a few of my friends. We had so much fun exploring the city, and the hospitality we were met with from the locals is something I will always remember. Dublin had a really special atmosphere, and I think one of the biggest contributors to that was the folk music playing everywhere whether on the radio or in live performance.

Throughout the summer, everyone from lab members to strangers told me I had to visit Edinburgh. The six hour train ride ebbed and flowed through iconic cities in the UK and the lush countryside with sheep farms. Upon entering the city, I was overcome with the aura of autumn. Maybe it was the chilly weather or the numerous bookstores scattered throughout downtown, but it made for a cozy weekend. One of my favorite parts was visiting Victoria Street, which is said to be JK Rowling's inspiration for Diagon Alley in Harry Potter.



I am so thankful to have had this experience. I was able to gain valuable research experience and knowledge in an unfamiliar discipline, while contributing toward a meaningful project in prostate cancer. The research certainly challenged me at times and required that I step outside my comfort zone in a different way than medical school requires of me, but I think this ultimately equipped me with the independence, resourcefulness, and confidence to undertake more challenges going forward in my educational pursuits.



Of equal value, I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to meet many wonderful people throughout these 8 weeks. From long conversations with friends in the lab to small talk with strangers on the bus, I further developed one of the most important skills in being a doctor – connecting with others. My worldview was shaped as I gained insight into how people in this part of the world live their life and what they value. I am filled with immense humility and gratitude for this unforgettable summer in Cardiff.