

Experiences: Alja Crnej

My home country is Slovenia and I have finished my medical school and ophthalmology residency there. Slovenia is a country of 2 million people, two medical universities and only around 150 ophthalmologists. An advantage of being small is knowing most of the ophthalmologists personally and easy communication with them. . However disadvantages include fewer requirements for subspecialist training, not enough competition, and most important of all a smaller pool of patients with less diverse pathologies. When a patient with a rare disease shows up it is less likely you will recognize it if you have never seen it before. Given these limitations, it is almost a necessity to go abroad to learn.

“The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires.” (William Arthur Ward)

I was extremely lucky to find inspiring teachers at home and abroad. I have observed Dr. Vladimir Pfeifer performing flawless surgeries of the cornea and anterior segment of the eye during my residency and I knew I would like to do the same. During my first phaco attempts I realized it would be a long and hard way.

My first observership abroad was in the Viennese University Hospital during my residency, where I met Prof. Oliver Findl. During this time, I was very impressed by his dedication and commitment to work and I was introduced to clinical studies. I was very happy he allowed me to help with data collection for a study during afternoons after the clinics, because it was too cold and windy for sightseeing that February. I followed Prof. Findl to London to Moorfields Eye Hospital, first as an observer and after finishing my residency back home as a fellow. The huge amount of surgical skills and knowledge I gained there was priceless. I was involved in many clinical trials, I wrote my first paper and did around 300 cataract operations.

Following an unsuccessful application for an attending position at University Eye Hospital in Ljubljana I got lucky - Dr. Vladimir Pfeifer was looking for an ophthalmologist for his private practice. I was faced with a different work setting, and gained priceless experience in comprehensive ophthalmology and cataract surgery. I had very valuable support from Dr. Marija Schwartzbartl-Pfeifer and I learned how to work without constant supervision, how to make my own decisions, minimize complications, and how to deal with different types of patient personalities.

I wanted to further educate myself in cornea and I found an observership at Massachusetts

Eye and Ear Infirmary, which is a Harvard University affiliated hospital. Again, I was impressed with the work dedication and the amount of knowledge they were offering. To my surprise, many of the attending physicians had already visited Slovenia, since my country hosted EVER three years in a row. Also Prof. Claes H. Dohlman, the father of cornea, establisher of the first cornea service in the world, and 92-year old gentleman (I wish there were more of these nowadays) has been in Portorose. Towards the end of the observership during lunch in the hospital's cafeteria, I asked him if he takes only domestic fellows or Europeans as well. He didn't really answer my question, but said: 'Send me your CV.' When he offered a two-year position, I didn't hesitate. I went back home for more suitcases and moved to Boston for three years (2=3, as every researcher knows).

I am extremely satisfied with my work life so far and the biggest part of my satisfaction is owed to the extraordinary mentors and teachers I have had. And by extraordinary I mean mentors who take time to explain, discuss, listen, sit and watch the trembling hands of trainees; the ones who are patient enough to rewrite papers until they are published and who help fill the knowledge gaps and seek opportunities to help trainees grow. These are mentors whom you can share your insecurities with, and ask the 'stupid' questions to. They are the ones who push you to take risks and aim higher, and are honest and unafraid to tell you hard truths about yourself and your work.

I also owe my work satisfaction to the institutions I have worked in. Moorfields Eye Hospital and Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary are the workplaces of many world-renowned experts who are taking time before or after busy clinics for seminars and conferences and are willing to share their knowledge and valuable experience with young ophthalmologists. UK and USA systems are designed to teach and transfer knowledge to younger generations. The mentees are the pride of their mentors. I think this should be the future goal of young ophthalmologists from all other countries. Moreover, the not so young ophthalmologists should not forget their own hurdles from the past and should become the extraordinary mentors to their younger colleagues.

My advice:

1. Look for opportunities – there are plenty of grants offered for observerships all around the world.
2. Find a good mentor – it makes a world of difference.
3. Seize every opportunity.

However, the more knowledge we acquire, the more we realize how much more there is to learn. And we should never forget to strike the right balance between our career and our

personal lives which is so important for true happiness.