

Letters from Amsterdam - Peter Barrow

I reluctantly left my 21 week pregnant wife at the very busy Johannesburg International Airport on the 1/1/2005. After a pleasant flight to Amsterdam, I was welcomed at Schipol Airport by Dr Marcel Cazimeer, one of 6 clinical gastroenterology trainees at the VUMC. Marcel dropped me at my accommodation for the night and told me that work started at 08h30 sharp the next day! After a pleasant afternoon walk around "Vandal Park", an English-style park with duck ponds and winding foot paths, I found a traditional Dutch Delicatessen and had an early dinner.

The next morning, in the pitch dark, I managed to work out the efficient Amsterdam tram system and arrived at work on time! Just in time for coffee. My guide book had warned me that the Dutch are the tallest nation in Europe (and drink the most coffee per person in the world), but on entering the tea room, I felt positively short, with even most of the female nursing sisters over 6ft. However, I was warmly welcomed and made to feel part of the unit right away.

The Gastro Unit at the VUMC (Free University Medical Centre) consists of 2 professors, 6 staff members (consultants), 6 assistants (Fellows) and 2 full time PhD students (excluding nursing and axially staff). Quite different to the medical gastro unit at the Johannesburg General Hospital with a total of 3 permanent medical staff members!

The VUMC is a mixed secondary and tertiary "ziekenhuis" (hospital) serving a population of about 200 000 people in a fairly upmarket part of town. Working at this hospital has given me an opportunity to be exposed to the full range of gastroenterology: from basic upper and lower endoscopy, ERCP, functional testing (oesophageal and anal manometry) to areas in which there is very limited exposure in South Africa, including endoscopic treatment of Zenker's, double balloon and video endoscopy, endoscopic ultrasound and "interventional proctology" (including anal ultrasound). The outpatient clinics are interesting and I have been amazed by the number of patients with Coeliac disease and IBD. The gastro unit is very involved with inpatient care and I have been interested to see the number of PEGs and endoscopic duodenal feeding tubes inserted (especially in ICU patients). The emphasis on research is also stimulating.

On looking back over the first month and reviewing my LOG book, I can definitely say that my time so far in Amsterdam has been very worth while (as it stands at the moment I have been involved with over 150 procedures including 8 ERCs, 6 endoscopic treatments of Zenker's, 6 DBEs and 5 PEGs). However, I must say that I have missed my wife and it is great to have her (now 25 weeks pregnant) join me in Amsterdam after a month apart!

Peter Barrow Spending 3 months in Amsterdam