



A UNIQUELY

Singapore

EXPERIENCE

The time I spent in Singapore was one of the most formative and important years of my medical path. It was not only exciting and different, but also very fulfilling and educational. It gave me the chance to broaden my horizon and taught me how to overcome the language barrier and cultural background completely unknown to me, to understand my patients. I also learnt how to think out of the box and try to think like the patients.

After my medical degree, I stayed on to work in orthopaedic surgery in

Germany for one and a half years before travelling to Singapore. This was because I wanted to gain some experience working in the country I had trained in, so that I would be able to compare the healthcare systems of both countries.

STARTING OFF

Working in Singapore was new in every aspect, especially as I had no prior experience in taking care of acutely injured patients. Traumatology and

orthopaedic surgery were separated departments in Germany, with traumatology being a subspecialty of general surgery.

The process of moving here was already half the adventure, with a lot of processes and necessary paperwork. Thankfully, I received wonderful guidance and support from the staff at Singapore General Hospital. Yet, even at that point, the differences in the systems were already evident and almost caused the whole arrangement to fail.

In Germany, the title “doctor” is a scientific and academic title received after you have completed your doctoral thesis, and is not connected to a medical degree. Thus, you are considered a physician when you graduate. When Singapore asked my university if I were a doctor, they gave information that I wasn’t, since my thesis was at that point not defended, and that naturally caused some confusion.

DEALING WITH DIFFERENCES

The differences went deeper than just titles though. There were many other differences, both big and small. Despite all that, what surprised me right from the beginning was how supportive the hospital was. Various courses, lunch lectures, journal clubs and many opportunities for further education were offered to me not only at the beginning of but also during my stay.

Being paired up with a consultant and registrar to form a team that took care of their list was very different than the ward-based system we had in Germany, where you have smaller wards but are responsible for all the patients. I found that the local system was a great way to work, since all doctors involved knew their patients and had actually operated on them. Having more than eight people in the ward rooms also took a bit of getting used to, since I was accustomed to seeing only two to four beds per room.

Another major difference was the concept of the house officers being the doctors on the ward, taking care of discharges, admittances and the basic ward work, only calling on seniors when they needed help. In Germany, all physicians who are not a consultant will have to do the ward work and paperwork, taking up a lot of time from the more experienced doctors who could be running clinics or performing operations.

Working in the emergency department gave me great insight into the local culture. Since everyone may encounter falls or accidents, I had the chance to attend to many different patients. One of the first patients I treated had a wrist fracture that was a couple of days old. She had come in only because her traditional medicine was not helping. It was quite eye-opening to see her wrist packed with herbs and ligatures, and uncovering how the fracture looked like in an X-ray.

There was also a difference in the dress code which I welcomed but equally cursed on some mornings. Going to work in any outfit and changing into the uniforms, coats and sturdy tennis shoes (which were kept in lockers), like in Germany, would have been a blessing on some mornings. On the other hand, I loved the fact that we wore not only our personal clothing, but also that feminine clothing like skirts and high-heeled shoes were not frowned upon.

The numerous facilities within the hospital made working life seemed less tedious and made up for long hours. In Germany, we did not have the chance to go shopping or to the bank within the hospital compound. In Singapore, there were so many different places within the hospital compound to have our meals; the variety of the offers was like Disneyland compared to my previous hospitals that only had one canteen and a coffee house which closed at 6 pm.

LOOKING BACK

In summary, the work life and patients in Singapore are different, but the friendly colleagues and staff made the transition easy. I had a very enriching and lovely time which I fondly look back on frequently. ◆

PROFILE



TEXT BY

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Dr Tanja Biermann was born in Singapore and lived here till the age of ten. She had also lived in Portugal for ten years and moved to Hamburg, where she completed her medical degree and doctoral thesis. After her stay in Singapore, she moved back to Hamburg where she completed her specialist training in orthopaedic surgery. She now continues to work at the University Medical Centre Hamburg-Eppendorf.