

Joan Lennon ENTOG Report

This year, I was lucky enough to be chosen for the ENTOG exchange to Norway. This annual event allows Obs and Gynae trainees from all over Europe to meet, share and learn from one another. I'm also lucky enough to have your attention for a moment to recount the experience.

As I travelled from Dublin to Bodo via Oslo up over the coastline, I was struck by the landscape. An expansive and complex mixture of mountain ridges, lakes and fractured coastline. Towns and farms were dotted about, but notably not too closely! It's reminiscent of parts of Donegal, but on a completely different scale.

On Monday morning myself and three other trainees (hailing from Romania, Finland and Austria) took part in the Nordlandssykehuset Obs and gynae department morning handover. Our hosts were courteous, providing strong coffee and conducting the meeting in English. From there, we were immersed in their day-to-day happenings. We joined in observing on the labour ward, in clinic and in theatre.

Like my own hospital (Our Lady of Lourdes in Drogheda), Bodo acts as a referral centre for other units. Complex obstetric and gynae patients are referred in. Unlike my hospital, the distances involved are counted in hours, rather than minutes.

Like my own hospital, they also refer patients on in cases of extreme prematurity or complexity. The distances involved are about ten times greater, though! The university hospital in Tromso deals with these cases.

Many of the cases I saw were fascinating, geography a constant consideration in the background. The question of how to provide top quality, safe and fair medical care over so scattered a population always hovering at the edge of conversation.

We were hosted by doctors who worked in the hospital. I was lucky enough to be welcomed by Dr Kristen Skoygoy, a senior consultant who was a Bodo native. We four visitors also spent a lot of time with the junior trainees, Ingvyld, Andrea and Maria. They put us through our paces on an evening hike and shared some Norwegian delicacies at home.

There were many opportunities to talk, to contrast Ireland and Norway. There were also great chances to compare Austria, Romania and Finland, as well. It is always remarkable to be reminded of the common concerns in any area of medicine, as well as the concerns shared by trainees. We were in a remarkable landscape where geography shapes people and the way they approach problems of all sorts.

And the more we talked, the more it became clear that one could easily replace geography with financial constraints, political will or human resources. The themes of access, staffing, fairness and justice wove through our conversations. The challenges we face might vary in their exact form, but their presence is undeniable. That said, the ingenuity and creativity with which they're addressed is just as varied and impressive.

Not that it was all very philosophical, mind you! We took the chance to act like tourists and enjoyed fantastic hospitality.

The opportunity to meet and talk to other trainees was invaluable. I gained a lot of insight into how training is organised in different countries and it gives me a lot to think about. We all practice obs and gynae a little differently, constrained by the reality of our home hospitals and countries. Sharing experience bridges gaps and, I think, goes a long way to reducing the feelings of isolation that can so often creep in.

Almost all of us are facing challenges at the moment, with more looming on the horizon. Exchanges such as this allow us a chance to learn from one another and to find creative solutions. The fact that we all do things a bit differently usually implies there's no perfect way. In striving to improve patient care and training, we need to listen to each other and to share. The generosity of time, spirit and thought that I encountered during the last three days reminded me that sharing is not only necessary, but also incredibly rewarding.

Many thanks again for your time and attention. Thank you again to my hosts in Bodo and to those who arranged this exchange. It is difficult to overemphasise the input of the ENTOG committees in Ireland Norway and I thank them for all their time, care and hard work!