

2010 RCPA Scholarship in Pathology for Medical Schools - Christina Cheng

When the RCPA Medical Student Research Scholarship was offered in 2010, I was a second year medical student who, admittedly, had a very limited exposure to the world of pathology. Familiarity with the roles of a pathologist was paltry, with me basically only knowing that pathologists were the (seemingly only) people who understood and interpreted the various histopathology images which we had seen on lecture slides. In all honesty, it did not seem like an exciting specialty to be a part of.

I applied for the scholarship because I wanted to discover more of pathology, to find out why our lecturers in pathology were so passionate about this discipline I knew so little about. As my supervisor, Professor Soon Lee provided me with a list of possible research studies to attach myself to – telling me, however, that it was unimportant which I picked, because what he wanted was for me to attain a broad overview of what it is a pathologist does, and not limit myself to working in a particular study. Thus although my application outlined that I would undertake a project in breast carcinogenesis, most of the work I did was in researching prostate cancer – and even then, this was not the crux of what the scholarship meant to me.

My first introduction to pathology was at Liverpool Hospital. Here I was shown the basics of clinical pathology – from dissecting and processing various surgical resections to analysing actual blocks and slides. This mere introduction was eye-opening – never before had I truly considered what a pathological diagnosis entails, and how important this process was clinically. The highlight of the scholarship opportunity, however, was the exposure to the research arm of pathology. I was able to visit the Ingham Institute at Liverpool and the Bosch Institute at the University of Sydney to see first-hand what various research projects were being undertaken. My participation allowed me to see how research can be tedious yet rewarding, and also showed me the roles that administration, funding and politics played in the research process. What became apparent was the dedication that each researcher had, and the importance of their work – the passion pathologists had for their work finally made sense.

The medical program has now been adjusted to include a greater exposure to the various aspects of pathology – something I now believe to be fundamental. Although I was unable to follow a research project from start to finish, the RCPA Scholarship has broadened my exposure to pathology, and in doing so has not only concreted my passion for research, but also has brought me back to appreciate what I believe to be the roots of medicine.

Now, two years down the track, I have continued to benefit from my original exposure to pathology in second-year. I am currently undertaking a pathology-based honours project; I am also preparing to embark on a pathology elective in Oxford, UK at the end of this year. I never imagined that the research scholarship would lead to opportunities like this – I feel incredibly fortunate and grateful that it has.