

IBRA Fellowship Report

Inselspital, Bern University Hospital

Bern, Switzerland

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I had the privilege to train as an IBRA Fellow for a month at Inselspital in Bern under the supervision of Doctor Matthias Zumstein, focusing mainly on shoulder and elbow surgery, and distal radius trauma. During this time I also had the chance to witness a few hand and wrist surgeries performed by the Hand Surgery team under the supervision of Doctor Esther Vögelin and her team. The Inselspital's history goes back to 1354, and medical students were trained there from 1841. It is now a large modern centre with 1,000 beds, more than 7,000 staff, and caring for more than 250,000 patients per year. Maurice Müller, named the "Orthopaedic Surgeon of the Century" by SICOT in 2002, was professor and head of orthopaedic surgery there from 1963 to 1980, and orthopaedics has remained a strong focus of this hospital.

The Orthopaedics and Traumatology Department is a well-organized unit. Daniela Lüthi, the Fellowship secretary, was extremely helpful in providing accommodation options at short notice and providing clear instructions on how to get to the Department on the first day! Morning meetings were varied and interesting, with a wide mix of skills present from world-class surgeons to medical students. Even if I do not speak German, I found myself understanding the majority of scientific discussions, and found that most doctors and students in the hospital could speak English.

I had the opportunity to see several shoulder arthroscopies with Dr Zumstein, and became very interested in his anatomic acromio-clavicular joint stabilization procedure, nicknamed "bipod". Through several discussions, I could appreciate the rationale behind the technique and the work achieved so far, and was very happy when he offered me to collaborate on writing an article outlining the technique and reporting on the preliminary results, even on such a brief visit. This work should be completed in the coming months to be submitted for publication.

There was a lot of latitude in my weekly schedule, and this allowed me to attend clinics, research the "bipod" technique, observe the Hand Surgery team during microsurgical procedures, and attend some challenging distal radius fractures and radio-carpal dislocations operated on by Hand Surgeons as well as Orthopaedic Surgeons. The proximity of Bern to several major ski fields certainly supplied the Department with a steady flow of upper extremity trauma!

The best aspect of the Fellowship for me was the high quality discussions I had the chance to have with Dr Zumstein during his clinics. I felt I was treated as an equal; my opinion was just as valued as his so long as I could argue it! He stressed this critical aspect from the start, and I could see he required the same level of questioning from his junior surgical staff. As major elbow trauma is rather infrequent, the clinic was also the best place to see and discuss these cases as they presented at various periods after their injury.

Bern is a beautiful and compact city. Most things are accessible by foot or a short tram or bus ride. Coming from Australia with my wife, I was not too shocked by the cost of living issues often raised by foreign travellers to Switzerland. There is deep culture and history in Bern; one can appreciate art and architecture from the Middle Ages to the modern paintings at the Zentrum Paul Klee, or visit Albert Einstein's apartment in the old town. It can be difficult getting around at times without knowing German, but I found almost anyone could understand some English or French, and was never left stranded! The city provides many photo opportunities, and a quick train ride takes you to the Alps to renowned ski fields such as the Jungfrau area or Zermatt – I must say the snow was good when I went! The Swiss rail network is also extremely efficient, and Bern offers many easy connections to major European cities for an easy weekend escape.

The weather in February was cold for an Australian, but there were plenty of opportunities to warm up, including the Berner Fasnacht (Bern carnival) which started in medieval times. In fact, these celebrations were ongoing in many cities I visited during my time there, and provided a constant distraction from the cold of winter!

Overall, I completed this Fellowship with a very positive impression. There was a ton of surgical learning opportunities to choose from, too vast to focus on all aspects. There were two other Fellows in other Services within the Department at the time, from the United States and Hong Kong, and this provided a fantastic multi-cultural backdrop and networking opportunity. Dr Zumstein is a great mentor, and I am certain anyone who has had the opportunity to work under his supervision would also recommend this Fellowship to others. I believe the experience will be very useful in my practice, and the friends and contacts I have gained in the surgical community is a priceless bonus!

I am very grateful that IBRA facilitated this learning opportunity, and would like to thank the staff and doctors at Inselspital, in particular Dr Zumstein and Daniela Lüthi, for making my stay in Bern instructive and enjoyable!

Dr Kim Latendresse