Experience abroad and participation in ESCMID educational activities: results from a survey among French infectious diseases specialists in training

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Experience abroad and participation in ESCMID educational activities: Results from a survey among French infectious diseases specialists in training.

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To the Editor,

Today, infectious diseases (ID) specialists are facing complex and challenging situations due to, among others, the exponential increase in international travels and migration, the impacts of climate change, the emerging or re-emerging infectious diseases and the huge diversity of social and cultural background of the patients they are taking care of. A clinical or scientific experience abroad (outside of one’s home or training country) may then bring valuable benefits to future ID specialists.

The European Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases (ESCMID) offers trainees a broad variety of educational activities across the world: courses, workshops, summer school, mentorship and observerships.

We conducted a national survey among French ID trainees, to assess their motivations to undertake a clinical or academic international experience, and to identify factors that influence their decision. We also assessed their knowledge and perception of ESCMID’s educational activities.

All French ID trainees and all recently graduated ID physicians (with a senior position for less than two years) were eligible. These criteria are the prerequisite to be member of the RéJIF (the young French Infectious Diseases society). The 29-item questionnaire (supplementary data) was pilot tested by 15 ID trainees. The survey was accessible online from November 5th 2018 to January 30th 2019. Data were analyzed with R software (version 3.5.3).

We received 123 responses out of the 402 invitations sent by email (response rate 31%). Half of the respondents were female (65/123, 53%). Positions held were mainly resident (48%) followed by fellows (22%) and senior ID specialist (15%) (supplementary material).

To the question “how much would you like to complete part of your clinical or scientific training abroad?” (on a 6-point Likert-scale), the answer was “Yes, very much” for half of the respondents. Overall, 81% of the respondents were in favor of completing part of their training abroad. Their most frequent motivations were
to discover a new culture (71%), to improve skills in a specific area (71%), to improve foreign language
skills (70%) and to discover a new health-care system (66%).

The main barriers encountered were: the burden of administrative procedures (59%), financial reasons
(additional costs related to moving, fees for administrative procedures, lower income during the period
abroad (grant or lower-graded position)) (58%), family reasons (54%) with no significant difference between
men and women, and the fear of a negative impact on career progression (fear to lose a current or future
position during the stay abroad) (26%).

Factors perceived as facilitators were: having available contacts abroad (e.g. established partnership
between university or between hospitals) (82%), financial support (78%), incentives via a validation of the
training abroad as part of the French mandatory training (70%), administrative support (62%).

Fifty-five percent had previously heard about ESCMID educational activities but only 4% had participated in
one of them. The main barriers for not participating were clinical duties (53%), lack of time to find out about
the sessions (30%), self-perception of insufficient level of English (19%). We identified the following
facilitators for participation: better communication on grants (70%) and validation of the educational activity
as part of the mandatory French training (53%).

Our results show that a majority of the respondents declare having interest in undertaking an international
experience during their ID training. So-called “International health electives” are a popular component of
many medical schools in Canada and the United States (1). An abroad training allows to acquire cross-
cultural attitudes, skills, and knowledge that directly affect clinical decision-making in treating imported
diseases among immigrants and travelers. It has also been reported to enhance personal development (2)
and favor certain values such as altruism, idealism, community service, and humanism (3).

The top-ranked facilitator was establishing and expanding contacts abroad. It emphasizes that connections
and network play a crucial role. Several European initiatives took place over the past years to promote
networking for trainees. The Trainee Association of ESCMID (TAE) Trainees Day organized during
ECCMID, observership grants and mentorship program launched by ESCMID are a few examples. In the search for connections abroad, mentorship can play a determining role and help building a career, as recently highlighted in the survey conducted among ID trainees from Europe (4). Administrative and financial concerns were the main reported barriers. Similarly, financial burden was found as the main obstacle in a survey assessing obstacles for European student mobility (5).

Family burdens came third only to financial and administrative concerns. Family burdens include difficulties in maintaining two careers, in moving family and/or partner abroad, childcare or transfer children to a new education system, being separated from the rest of the family etc. A European study on factors that may inhibit researcher mobility and career development (6), acknowledge how the pressure to be mobile can discourage women from pursuing research. The problem of having to “choose” between a research career and family or relationship was frequently mentioned (6). The French medical academic landscape is still dominated by the male gender for the top-level positions. In France, only 21% of medical professors were women in 2018 (sex ratio 3.7 men for one woman) (7). This severe unbalanced gender distribution at the professorship ID positions has also been observed in other European countries (8). A survey conducted among ID physicians from Europe shown that women were less likely than men to receive visiting appointments and participate in high-level decision-making boards, activity that encourages the building of professional networks and contacts outside home institutions (8). A mobility abroad is mandatory to access a professorship position in France and other European countries. This required mobility may play a role, among other factors, in keeping women outside of the academic world. Potential solutions need to be explored. The provision of childcare services in conference as recently highlighted by young researchers in the field is one example (9).

This research work emphasizes the barriers met by future ID specialist to temporary train outside of their home country. These results invite us to reflect on logistical and financial solutions to make this opportunity accessible to more ID trainees. Further research should focus on mapping determinants of mobility among
ID trainees at the European level and we are open to future collaborative projects with the Trainee Association of ESCMID (TAE) or other national young Infectious diseases societies. We hope that our findings can help promote mobility within and outside Europe for future ID specialists and raise awareness for equal opportunities for training abroad.

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Some of the results have been presented as a poster at the Journées Nationales d’Infectiologie, Lyon, France 2019.

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Transparency Declaration

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Bibliography:


Figure 1.A: Main barriers and facilitators perceived by the respondents to undertake part of their training abroad