

Overseas Medical Elective: THORACIC SURGERY IN GERMANY

Text and photo by Crystal Chia



In May 2025, I embarked on an overseas clinical elective at St Hildegardis Hospital in Cologne, Germany, where I joined the thoracic surgery team for a month. It was a significant milestone in my medical education journey, and the experience was extremely fulfilling and memorable.

Throughout the elective, I was exposed to a wide range of thoracic conditions and surgical procedures, including wedge resections, segmentectomies, lobectomies and pleurectomies. Under the patient guidance of a skilled and nurturing team, I had the opportunity to scrub in for numerous operations. For the first time, I could truly put my hands to the test. Gradually, I was entrusted with more responsibilities, such as holding the thoracoscopic camera, dissecting muscle and pleural layers for port insertion, securing chest drains and suturing surgical incisions.

Towards the end of the month, I assisted in a pleural biopsy, with just the surgeon and me at the operating table. I was even entrusted to independently manoeuvre the camera throughout the whole procedure. It was truly a surreal and empowering experience to act as the first assistant. These moments have significantly deepened my understanding of thoracic surgery and reinforced my interest in the field.

Beyond technical skills, I was inspired by the doctors' bedside manner and their communication with patients. They consistently treated patients with empathy, dignity and respect. I am very grateful for this opportunity to learn from them.

In the final week of my elective, the doctors invited me to join them at an international thoracic surgery conference in Budapest. This was my first overseas conference. I attended insightful presentations by global experts and connected with professionals from around the world. I also had hands-on experience with cutting-edge surgical and robotic tools, and was captivated by the technological advancements and the possibilities they presented for patient care.

Naturally, the experience came with its challenges. Ward rounds and most patient interactions were conducted entirely in German, which made it difficult to fully grasp everything. Fortunately, I had been learning the language for eight months prior to the trip which allowed me to manage basic interactions with patients, such as introducing myself, obtaining their

consent to perform venepuncture for them, and holding simple conversations that helped build rapport and trust.

Logistically, navigating the transport system was challenging as well. In the face of frequent train delays and cancellations, many early mornings involved having to sprint between platforms and to the hospital. Yet, despite this, I believe these experiences have trained my adaptability and resilience and played a part in making the trip even more unforgettable.

Last but not least, I am thankful for this opportunity to immerse myself in German culture and connect with the local doctors and medical students. Living like a local and seeing healthcare through a different lens has broadened my perspectives and deepened my appreciation for diversity in medicine and healthcare systems.

All in all, this overseas elective was deeply enriching, eye-opening and valuable. It has reinforced my passion for medicine and compassion for patients. I am committed to upholding the values of humility, excellence, integrity and respect, and hope to inspire and support others, just as the doctors have inspired me. ♦



Crystal is a Year 4 medical student at the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine. She is passionate about serving the community and strives to make a meaningful impact in the lives of others. Outside of school, she enjoys practising martial arts and spending quality time with her family.