

All Is Not Snow in Hokkaido

Text and photos by Chua Shunjie

THE MENTION of Japan reminds many of its numerous brands of cosmetics and other skincare products. Their marketing prowess has successfully promoted the ideal of smooth white skin into our psyches. But the Land of the Rising Sun does not just excel in the area of aesthetics, it is also one of the strongest nations in dermatological practice and research. Last September, I did a month-long research elective in Hokudai, the centre of Dermatology in Hokkaido, northern Japan.

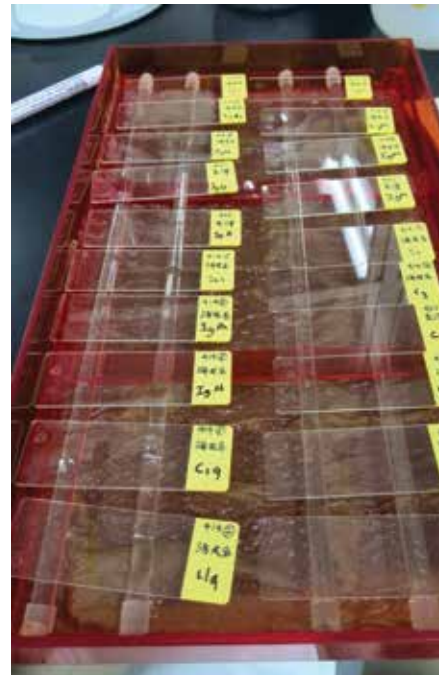
Hokudai is short for Hokkaido University, which was founded as an agricultural university. Its main campus is located in the bustling city of Sapporo, and features luscious trees, small quaint streams and little routes that will bring you close to nature. These make the university one of the most attractive in the country.

Working with the ward and clinical team

Due to my interest in dermatological research, I wanted to do my elective in a place which could allow me to experience the breadth of this discipline. I did not need to look further than my textbook, *Shimizu's Textbook of Dermatology*, for this. I googled the author, Prof Hiroshi Shimizu, and found out

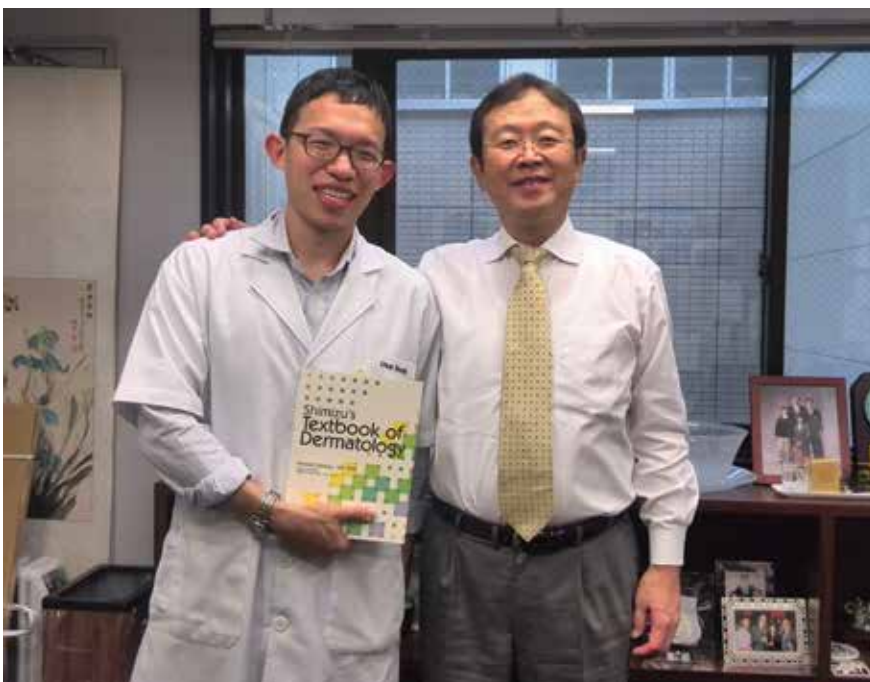
that he was one of the most prominent dermatologists in Japan. He replied to my emails promptly and allowed me to join his department at Hokudai as a clinical/research student. This allowed me to explore two areas of Dermatology that complemented each other.

As one of the top training hospitals for Dermatology in Japan, Hokudai organises numerous educational sessions for its residents and doctors attached to the department. These sessions were the most exciting as I received exposure to many cases. Examples of such sessions included weekly



Direct immunofluorescence refresher

visiting experts from other hospitals in the city who lectured on topics relevant to Dermatology trainees. Next, there were the grand rounds led by Prof Shimizu himself. These would start with case presentations by the trainees, and the entire department would proceed to a special treatment room in the wards thereafter. The junior doctors would then help the patients undress, to expose their lesions. The curtain that was occluding them would be opened sequentially for Prof Shimizu to review and discuss with the department. The speed and efficiency at which these meetings were done was something that really astounded me. In the evenings, trainees based in other hospitals in Hokkaido would stop by and present special cases. One aspect I personally found interesting was the pathology sessions, where



Prof Shimizu (right) presenting his textbook to me as a souvenir

students would be taught to evaluate their own slides. It was really rewarding to realise that your findings from an earlier practice session were the ones that the professor pointed to during the session.

The clinical experience was excellent as there was a greater spread of cases. I also found the Japanese really warm in their interactions, and could see the mutual respect and trust that the patients and doctors had for each other. I felt that the Japanese drive towards improvement of practices and quality was something that I could learn from.

Learning to probe into the unknown

Research is a key focus of the department, and it has published papers in most major journals. A broad spectrum of research is carried out in the university, including basic, translational and clinical projects. Most of the clinical projects were carried out by the residents, while basic science and translational projects were carried out by members of the faculty, PhD students and postdoc fellows. These PhD students and postdocs were mostly former residents in the university and thus could help to review patients even while they conducted research.

The department recorded images meticulously. Lesions on most of the patients would be photographed at several angles with a DSLR camera. If required, dermatoscopic images would also be taken. These images would then be broadcast on high resolution screens for discussion and kept in a database for easy future retrieval.

I was supervised by PhD students during the entire elective. This offered me the opportunity to refresh my skills in 2D gel electrophoresis, enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay, polymerase chain reaction and immunofluorescence training. I also took part in multiple research discussions which enhanced my knowledge.

Friendship and travel

While at Hokudai, I was paired with two junior doctors in the department. Their official role was to give me guidance and also to help me participate in the department's numerous activities. I was really grateful for their assistance, as they went above and beyond the call of duty by providing me with Japanese language support too. (Students interested in pursuing an elective in Japan: do take note that most of the content you encounter will be in Japanese.)

The two doctors brought me around the city and also informed me about other places of interest. On their advice, I visited the Sapporo Beer Museum and Sapporo Factory in the city. They featured many exhibits on beer production, had tasting sessions of Sapporo Beer (which is only sold from the factories), and sold a variety of memorabilia so that travellers could bring home a piece of the city with them. If anyone experiences alcohol intoxication, they can clear their heads in many of the hot springs in Jozankei.



Beer lovers should not miss the Sapporo Beer Museum

They can also explore the vast swathes of natural scenery in northern Hokkaido.

Reflections

The Roman philosopher Seneca said, "Voyage, travel, and change of place impart vigour". After this trip, I was able to view this quote with new eyes, because I feel a greater level of energy in what I do.

I am highly thankful for everyone who made my trip possible, and would like to express my greatest gratitude to Prof Shimizu for allowing me to do an attachment at his department and reviewing this article. Special thanks also go to faculty members: Riichiro Abe, Toshifumi Nomura, Wataru Nishie, Yasuyuki Fujita, Ken Natsuga, Hiroo Hata and all the residents in the department for their guidance.

If you are interested in knowing more about my experience, visit the Hokudai Department of Dermatology website: <http://www.derm-hokudai.jp/en> (search: "Hokkaido university dermatology"). ■



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