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**An account of my journey to participate at the
International Student Congress of (bio) Medical Sciences (ISCOMS)
In The Netherlands.**

30/7

I, Dr. W.V.V. De Silva who is currently working in Orthopedics unit, District General Hospital, Matale, have graduated from University of Peradeniya with a second class honors in 2012. While in the university, I was able to do a lot of research which enabled me to have 10 publications.

The abstract on "THE PROTEASE ACTIVITY IN FIBROID TISSUE AND ADJACENT MYOMETRIUM" which was done in collaboration with department of Bio Chemistry, University of Peradeniya and New unit of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Teaching Hospital Peradeniya was accepted by the 21st International Student Congress of (bio) Medical Sciences (ISCOMS), held from the 3rd to 6th of June, 2014. Following the congress, I was specially selected to participate in the "International Research Fellowship" (IRF) organized by ISCOMS to work in a structural biology lab for two weeks (7th to 21st June, 2014).

In this article, I have elaborated my experience gained during these weeks, my first journey out of the country.

What is ISCOMS?

ISCOMS (International Student Congress of (bio) Medical Sciences) is an annual congress which was held this year for the 21st time in the University Medical Center of Groningen (UMCG), Netherlands. Principle aim of this congress is to engage and attract students to (bio) medical research, while maintaining its reputation as a leading forum for student research exchange in (bio) medical sciences worldwide.

There were 600 participants, out of which 340 were international participants from 40 different countries. There were 350 researchers, who presented their work under different headings in plenary / oral or poster sessions.

Surprisingly all the events of this congress were organized by 28 students from UMCG.

Events in ISCOMS

There were pre course workshops on research methodology and medical statistics, which were very useful. During the congress, I was able to participate in a practical session on plastering and casting which really helped me, as I am currently attached to an orthopedic unit. There

Dr. V. de Silva agreed with pleasure.
01/08/2014.
Priyanka.

were several keynote lectures in which we were educated on groundbreaking research that has been done at UMCG.

We were taken out for a formal dinner where traditional Dutch food was introduced and on the final day of the congress, there was a "worldwide ISCOMS party" where all the international students had to dress up in their national attire and was able to taste different food from different countries.

Finally, to end the congress, they had organized a post congress tour to an island in Netherlands called Ameland, where we could see the typical Dutch culture and architecture.

What is IRF (International Research Fellowship)?

Out of all international participants, 24 researchers including me were specially selected to participate in 2 weeks fellowship program, where we were allocated into work in different laboratories.

I worked with a drug design team in a structural biology lab. I was asked to purify a protein (Aspartate TransCarbomylase) which might be a possible drug target for Malaria. Most of the work I've done was quite new to me and I gained a lot of lab skills during this short period of training. Also, I was taught on presentation skills where we had to present and write an abstract at the end of the IRF programme.

Strengthens noted in the journey

01. Organizing committee – ISCOMS

As mentioned above, whole ISCOMS was organized by 28 bachelor students in UMCG who were aged 20 – 22 years. Their theme "For students. From students" was truly evident during the congress and it was surprising how capable they were in organizing such a big event.

02. Time Management / Punctuality

All Dutch people are very particular about punctuality. All meetings, transportation and even the parties started on time and finished in time. They always made sure to arrive at a place 5 minutes before and they did not encourage any delays beyond 3 minutes.

We had to follow a strict schedule during the congress, which included lectures, programmes and workshops from 8am to 6pm each day. They managed to start each day on time and finished each programme on time without altering the time schedule.

03. Friendly environment

We had a warm welcome and throughout the congress, they made sure that we were happy and content. Not only the organizing committee but also all the citizens in Groningen were treating us very friendly without any discrimination.

04. Using bicycles

Groningen, the city we stayed has been elected as the "World Cycling City" because 57% of the journeys within the city are made in bicycles. The city is very much adapted to the wishes of those who want to get around without a car, as it has an extensive cycling network, good public transport and large pedestrian zones in the city center.

People in all ages and all socio-economic status riding their bicycles around the city really amazed me.

05. Enjoying the free time

Dutch people are good at planning their free time. Most of their free time is spent with friends and they always celebrated their achievements. Surprisingly there is always an end time for their parties as well.

06. Architecture and monuments

There was a lot of artwork done in the UMCG hospital. It is said that, 1% of total budget of a construction must be allocated for art work in the construction.

Weaknesses noted during my stay

07. Individual lives Vs. Healthy Aging Concept

Unlike in Sri Lanka, they live individually. They hardly expect favours from others and they always prioritize their work than attending to others' needs. They do assist each other, once their own work is done.

I noticed that in many parts of the country elderly people had to manage their work all alone and almost no one bothered to assist or care for them even in super markets, roads, etc. which is a major difference when compared to people in our country who are hospitable.

UMCG is considered as the "healthy aging campus" in Netherlands. All the departments have dedicated their research work on this theme. During the congress I met a professor in the university where his main research interest is to find out why the aging

population is not a burden in South Asian region. At that moment, I felt proud of my country and people as I am from a country who care about our elders.

08. Spiritual life

It is sad to hear that almost none of the young population follows any religion. They don't think about their spiritual lives.

Suggestions from what I have seen

01. Try to arrange a student research congress in University of Peradeniya. As a start, we can join with other local universities for which I am happy to coordinate since I have the experience and later consider extending internationally.

02. Increase the awareness among the university students/ medical students about international research conferences and the availability of travel grants.

Here are a few examples of international student conferences;

International Federation of Medical Students' Association – Netherlands (IFMSA - NL)

Asian Medical Students' Association (AMSA)

25th European Students' Conference

6th Annual International Medical Students Meeting (AIMS) – Portugal

9th Leiden International Medical Student Conference (LIMSC) – Netherlands

03. Educate the 1st year medical students about their future scope i.e. as a clinician, as a researcher or as an administrator. With this the students can prepare themselves for their future ambitions.

04. Encourage the university/medical students to do more research and assist them to publish their work. It is necessary to inform the students on current research topics that the departments are interested in and request them to work for these topics.

05. University students should expose themselves more into lab work and encourage them to do PhDs.

06. It is important to make links with other international universities where we can exchange students for fellowships and internships. There were quite a lot of Latin American and Eastern Asian students who came to France and Netherlands to do few weeks of internships as a mutual exchange between universities among those countries.

07. Encourage the students to learn another international language apart from English. It is clearly shown that knowing English only sometimes is not enough in exchanging ideas and it is an added advantage if you can speak other international languages.

Finally yet importantly, I wish to say that I had an amazing experience by participating in this conference and fellowship, and I sincerely hope that I might be able to broaden my horizons in participating in many more international events. I also wish that my fellow doctors/ medical students who are interested in research work will also get a chance to participate in these kinds of activities. And I am always there to help them. (I was selected as an ambassador for the next ISCOMS)

Thank You

W.V.V. De Silva (Viraj)