

Doctors in Training Grant

PRELIMINARY REPORT



With a colleague

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Fellowship in Interventional Neuroradiology

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I am now just over three months into a one year combined Clinical and Research Fellowship in Interventional Neuroradiology at Toronto Western Hospital and the Hospital for Sick Children. It has been an exciting change of scene from Sydney, with exposure to cases that are often not treated or are rarely treated in Australia. I have been learning under the supervision of the highly skilled Professor Timo Krings and Professor Vitor Pereira.

The Fellowship

One big difference compared with my fellowship experiences in Australia is having dedicated time each week to undertake research outside the angiography suite. This means I tend to make a lot more progress on my research studies than I normally would in Sydney.

I also have the ability to collaborate with a number of different departments in the University Health Network – at present I am undertaking projects in collaboration with the Hospital for Sick Children on Vein of Galen Malformations as well as radial access in adolescents for cerebral angiography. I am also collaborating with the Department of Functional Neurosurgery here at Toronto Western Hospital, to extend further on my PhD research based on white matter changes in mood disorders. My supervisors are supportive, and have even allowed me to organise a randomised controlled trial beginning later this year on radial access for cerebral angiography in adults.

On the clinical side, there has been exposure to treatments rarely performed in Australia such as endovascular embolisation of cerebral AVMs with the aim of cure or for stage downgrading to allow for gamma-knife treatment. The Department of Neuroradiology here has a strong reputation in neuroanatomy, and this has greatly enhanced my understanding and management techniques for cranial and spinal dural AV fistulae. The Department caseload is high, but we have enough fellows that we all get decent exposure without being overwhelmed. I also get to attend the weekly neurovascular meeting at the Children's Hospital, and to observe and assist with the cases done there. This has been a personal goal for me, and my supervisors have allowed me to tailor my fellowship and my weekly itinerary to help me reach my goals.

My days usually start at 7:30 am with ward rounds, and run until 5:30pm or 6 pm. Because there are enough fellows around, the on-call is not too onerous, giving me time with my family and to enjoy the city of Toronto.

The Health System

There are many similarities between the Canadian and Australian health systems, but a few major differences also. There is very little private health care in Canada, which removes some of the hierarchy for treatment accessibility we see every day in Australia. This also has its downsides – Canadians can wait months to get an MRI slot, and even then it might be at 2am in the morning (the scanners run 24/7).

In addition, there is enhanced centralisation of care here, so that major centres in Toronto have a large catchment and thus the fellows get exposure to more of the rare cases you would struggle to get exposure to in Australia (where the caseload gets diluted by having too many centres offering the same treatments). In particular the centre I am working at has a strong reputation for treating AVMs and dural AV fistulae, so cases that other hospitals have not been able to cure often get referred here. There are a lot (and I mean a lot) of fellows from all around the world living in Toronto learning every sub-specialty you can imagine. School drop-off for my oldest child tends to involve clinical fellows from all over converging in one spot, then rapidly diverging to their respective hospitals.



1. My eldest son Antonio at the Ice Festival in Yorkville – his first exposure ever to this much ice and snow.
2. The walk to work.
3. Niagara Falls, 2 hours drive from Toronto.

The City

Toronto is a great city to live in. A major pro is the public transport – the fast and efficient subway gets me around the city quickly, and you don't have to wait more than 3 minutes for a train during peak hour.

The food scene is excellent, people are very friendly, and the public school system is well set up. Coffee – well, not as good as Australia, but there are a number of cafes that can do a semi-decent flat white. I would say the culture is closer to Australia's than the USA is, and it is not too much of an adaptation.

Obviously, the cold took some getting used to. It got down to -25 degrees Celsius during the polar vortex in late January, and February is definitely the coldest month overall. Only now in April has the snow melted, and I am told (and I hope it is true) that May and the coming summer are supposed to be brilliant. That being said, once you buy a heavy duty jacket, some decent shoes so you don't slip, a beanie and some good gloves – you are OK! It takes me less than ten minutes to get to the subway station, and once I'm all rugged up, I don't struggle at all.

Organising accommodation and schools

My wife and two boys (aged 2 and 5) followed me here one month after I landed, and so from the get-go we needed to organise a 2-bedroom apartment. A lot of the single fellows take over 1-bedroom apartments from the fellows preceding them (if you fit this category I recommend contacting the person currently doing your future job).

Housing and rentals are as expensive here as in Sydney, so I saved up for several months before coming over because the salary for a fellow would barely cover the rent for a decent 2-bedder. I think this helped me a lot, as I was able to secure a nice place in a neighbourhood called Yorkville, right next to the city and with good access to the subway.

My wife and I came to Toronto on a scoping mission in September last year when they were holding a conference in my field, and we organised to meet with a realtor who showed us a few places and sent us out a regular list of available apartments suiting our requirements until we found the one we liked. The realtor's here get a fee for both helping you find and for leasing out an apartment, usually one month's rent paid by the landlord and split evenly between the two brokers. If you are Canadian they usually require two-months' rent as deposit (one month to cover the brokers, one month deposited with the Real Estate Board), but if you are from overseas a third month is often requested as you won't have a Canadian bank account before you arrive. But your rent will then be covered for the first two and the last months.

Cheques are a still a big thing here, so you need to set up a bank account as soon as you land. You tend to pay your rent by providing your landlord with a 'void cheque' which is basically the same as giving over your bank details for automatic transfer of funds.

Public schools are fairly easy to set up. Once you have a rental lease, the public school your children go to is determined by your location, and then you just email the school to let them know. When you arrive, they want to see your Work Permit, birth certificate and vaccination evidence for your children, and your lease, and then you are good to go. School is 9am to 3pm for primary school (what we call Kindergarten in Australia refers to Senior Kindergarten here, and pre-school for 4-year olds is called Junior Kindergarten), and the kids sing the Canadian national anthem every morning. They need two pairs of shoes for school – a pair of outdoor/snow shoes that stay at school, and their regular play shoes. There are private schools, but mainly in the outer suburbs, and they are quite expensive – I have been pretty happy with the public school my older child is at.

Like in Australia, daycare has long waiting lists. However, the University Health Network (UHN) in Toronto has a corporate deal with a daycare company called Kids and Company that has centres all over the city with a guarantee of a spot within 6 months of putting your name down if you have a contract with UHN. I would recommend applying as soon as you sign your contract (five to six months prior to starting), and then apply for daycare straight away (I wish I had done this). However, it has worked out now and my younger child is at daycare two days per week, so my wife is able to pursue some additional studies at the University.

All in all it's been a great experience thus far, and I look forward to updating you again when I return in January 2020.

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