

Leave or Remain? Reflections on an Overseas Fellowship

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I remember when my advanced training in Cardiology was coming to an end in 2013; I had been married for a few years and my husband and I were starting to think about the “next phase” of our lives, of having children. It was also a time where my career was at a real turning point. Should I pursue my (long-term) dream of a PhD and an overseas fellowship? With this under my belt, and after yet another period of training and further subspecialisation, the plan was that I would be offered my dream job in a tertiary referral university hospital. The alternative was to follow a more simple, local path that might deliver a more achievable work-life balance for a female cardiologist with young children.

I decided (perhaps naively) that I could “have it all”, and followed through with the first option at around the same time as we started our family.

Fast-forward four years, and my husband and I are packing up our lives in Sydney to relocate to London with 2 kids (aged almost 3 and 9 months) in tow. I had secured a two-year NHMRC funded post-doctoral fellowship at St George’s, University of London and we’re off for me to follow my dream of becoming an expert in Inherited Cardiac Conditions and Sports Cardiology.

To say this was a challenging move would be an absolute understatement.

The complexities of obtaining funding, registration to practice in the UK (GMC), visas for my entire family, not to mention the basic requirements of finding a roof for over our heads, finding our way around an unfamiliar city and securing childcare when we arrived, were harder (and more paperwork!) than I ever could have imagined. And an enormous financial outlay too. There were so many moments in those first few months where I questioned our decision and thought about whether we should just pack it in and return home.

But now, in what seems like the blink of an eye, we are a month away from saying goodbye to London (doing our own Brexit). And I am reflecting on our time over here and thinking about the experiences we have had, and I am asking myself whether it was all worth it?

It was.

Here are the top five reasons why (despite all the personal, family and financial sacrifices) I believe an overseas fellowship is absolutely worth it:

1. Absolutely no more

essential sounding-board off which to bounce potential research ideas, discuss challenging cases and potentially collaborate with on projects. What I have rather unexpectedly discovered is the number of amazing contacts I have made within Europe and the USA (i.e. outside of my institution in London). There are multicentre studies, grants and of course meetings and conferences where you will meet so many other experts in your field, and in the broader medical community. Australia is far away from everywhere. We all know this. But when you spend time working overseas, you realise how much easier it is for our northern hemisphere colleagues to work together in multicentre collaborations without the tyranny of distance or the challenges of multiple (and difficult) time-zones. I am so excited to return to Australia with so many new contacts from around the globe, many of whom I can now call my friends and colleagues. Finally, and most importantly, I know that this experience has progressed my career in so many ways. The CV points that one can obtain on an overseas fellowship (including contributing to research papers, teaching opportunities, experiencing complex cases, taking part in multicentre international collaborations and gaining clinical experience) are simply immeasurable.

2. **Scope of Practice:** Although geographically Australia is a large (enormous!) country, by population it is relatively so small compared to a lot of the countries where you might consider doing an international fellowship (UK, USA and Canada being the top choices for most - due in a large part to the lack of language barrier). The case-load and case-mix are, accordingly, much greater simply due to the larger populations of these countries. Hence, your experience of the more challenging cases and your actual practical numbers (for procedural-based specialities) will increase exponentially in a relatively short period of time.
3. **Travel and Cultural opportunities:** Like I said, Australia is so big and so far away from most other countries in the world. It still stays so cosy UK buddies when I tell them we can fly for five hours and still be above Australia! The opportunity to travel and experience different cultures, islands and nature so close to your temporary home, is simply amazing. We still pinch ourselves when we return from a fabulous weekend somewhere in Europe, after a short one- or two-hour flight (or train ride) from a major airport so close to home. It has been so wonderful! It's simply incredible!

character building, and will help define the rest of your life. You will reminisce, talk and laugh about your experiences on fellowship forever.

In summary, there have been many tough moments and the financial strain of fellowship is so real. But I would do it all again in a second. I am so grateful I took this opportunity and have had these experiences, and I recommend anyone who is thinking about it to just do it. Go on, write that application; book those flights.

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