Friday 14th of April marked the first day of the medical French weekend. The first day of making the cultural and language change from English to français. I took my overnight flight from Doha to Paris, using my time on the flight to speak to the French couple I was sat in between, watch Abominable in French, and sleep.

Upon arrival in Paris, I was struck by the realisation that I was really going to do the medical French course, a course I’d been wanting to attend since my 2nd year of medical school (and I’m now in my 5th!). I’d spent a week looking at the handbook that had been mailed to me, trying to re-familiarise myself with vocabulary and grammar, both things I reassured myself I knew from my A-level in French and daily Duolingo practice, but doubted myself nonetheless. A wave of imposter syndrome hit me. Who did I think I was trying to do this course? What made me think I could take a history in English let alone French? Everyone’s going to think I’m stupid, I thought to myself.

However, many of those fears simply slipped away once I got to Lille. I managed to navigate around the town relatively easily with the aid of Google Maps and knowledge of the town from when I went on holiday there last year. I was able to order food with only minor difficulties while I waited to check in at the hotel. Once people started arriving at the hotel, I came to realise that I wasn’t the only one worried. I quickly made friends with a few of the 4th and 5th-year students and got chatting about how nervous and excited we felt about the course, how far we’d travelled from, and which universities we went to. While we waited for the rooms to be ready, we made the most of one of the lovely cafes around the corner and continued to get to know each other before reconvening in the breakfast room where we were introduced to the tutors.

I’d read about the tutors in the handbook and thought they all sounded so cool! They were a mix of British, French, and Egyptian doctors and a Swiss medical student from Edinburgh for good measure, each with their own unique experience of the French, British and Swiss healthcare systems. Putting faces to names helped to relieve my anxiety and transformed my nerves into pure excitement.

After the meeting, we went to our rooms, I got to meet my roommate and we headed out to our first activity, meeting our tutor. In the run-up to the course, we had indicated our language capabilities. Since I hadn’t spoken French in several years, I placed myself in the beginner group. This activity was to get to know each other (in French!) and to assess if you were in the right group. If not, you would get a tap on the shoulder and be moved up/down to a group that better suited you. My group was lovely and included a GP/author, an F3 doctor, several medical students and a vascular surgeon. We all had different reasons to do the course but shared the same desire to be able to communicate in French. Hesitantly, we talked about how we’d arrived in Lille, what specialities we were interested in, and what hobbies we had. Following the talk, we had dinner in the restaurant, where I received a tap on the shoulder to move me to a different group. Although I was sad to leave my group, I looked forward to the challenge my new group would offer.

The next day, we went to the Université Catholique de Lille, where we had several sessions to cover history taking for different specialities. During these sessions at the university, with the help of the handbook, we covered history taking in the hospital setting, including small cultural differences in the way people speak, e.g. j’ai fait du paracetamol for I’ve taken paracetamol, which literally translates to I have made paracetamol. We also discussed how brand names are more commonly used for medicines vs the generic name. During those teaching sessions we practised taking a cardiology history, a contraception history and how to present cases to senior doctors in French.

Following these sessions, we had 2 talks, one on working in Paris as a junior doctor, and the other on the impact of Brexit on working in France. They were both fascinating and revealed the ways I could incorporate working in France into my career, something I didn’t know was possible before speciality training.

To finish the day, we had a gala dinner, a delicious 3-course meal held at a fancy restaurant with all of us dressed in varying levels of glam. The wine flowed and the next thing I knew, I was at one of the local bars, having a whale of a time!

Sunday marked the last day of the course. We had 2 sessions in the morning, the locomotor system and respiratory medicine, before attending a workshop of our choosing. I attended the talk on the junior doctor/medical student experience in France vs the UK. I was surprised to learn just how different the systems were. To think that students in their 5th and 6th years were comparable to core trainees in the UK system was astonishing. The idea that the French equivalent of junior doctors were seen as students and not doctors was mildly unnerving. Nonetheless, it was fascinating to learn the differences and the ways I could integrate into the system as a UK doctor.

I deeply enjoyed the course. It surpassed all my expectations and boosted my confidence every day that I was there. The food was fantastic and the tutors were so helpful. I feel much better equipped to pursue a medical career in a francophone country and hope to attend the course again next year.

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