

Jonathan Schwartz
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schwa734@umn.edu

Karolinska Institutet Exchange Program Evaluation Report

I have spent the past four weeks (3/30/09-4/24/09) enrolled in the Neurology externship at Karolinska Universitetssjukhuset Huddinge, a township just south of Stockholm, Sweden. This essay serves as a summary of my activities while in Stockholm, as well as a guide for other students considering enrolling in this rotation.

Preparation prior to visit (Grade: 5)

Prior to departing, I began planning for this trip many months in advance with the help of the IMER Office at the University of Minnesota Medical School, as well as the Karolinska International Student Coordinator Office. I worked with Shannon Benson, who was a fantastic resource of information regarding the rotation from the University of Minnesota medical student perspective, providing me with previous rotation reports as well as information regarding both the rotation itself, and funding available. I also worked with Magdalena Palmqvist at the Karolinska Institute, who helped with the required paperwork, as well as other tasks prior to arriving, such as setting up housing in Stockholm. Finally, I was in email contact with the Neurologist at the Karolinska Universitetssjukhuset Huddinge, Dr. Sten Fredrikson, a few weeks prior to my departure, in order to confirm final details. The entire preparatory work was incredibly well-organized and is set-up to be student-friendly.

I highly recommend adding your email address to the Global Friends group, as they will set you up with a “global friend” prior to departure, who will be your instant friend both before arriving, as well as during the time in Sweden. I exchanged many messages with my global friend, Monica, prior to arriving, and also received information about multiple social events planned by the Global Friend group.

Conducting an MRSA screening test to arrival will save you some time, especially since it will allow you to see patients immediately—assuming the test is negative. If you do not conduct the test prior to leaving, you can have it done at the student health center here, with results returned a few days later. This is important, as Sweden has very low MRSA rates; they take the MRSA screening very seriously.

I would recommend studying some Swedish language prior to arriving. It by no means is necessary to get around, as virtually everyone in Stockholm speaks very good English; however, there are times when knowing even just a bit of Swedish can come in very useful (the public library in Minneapolis has a Swedish language CD you can check out, and I found a few good websites with audio clips for help with pronunciation). It would also behoove you to study a bit about Swedish culture and traditions, as well as tourist attractions and other sights you hope to see while in Stockholm. I found that free time on weekends goes by incredibly quickly.

Also important is to contact your credit card company to inform them you will be abroad. It helps to set up a PIN, since many times when using credit you are required to enter a PIN to verify the payment. It is possible to get by without doing this, however when checking out at a store, it takes significantly more time. Be aware your credit card company will likely charge a small percentage fee for

all purchases, as well as a transaction fee when using an ATM (usually \$10/time). Save some money and bring a large amount of cash to convert to SEK/kronor at the airport when you arrive (currently, 1 USD = 8.50 SEK, or 1 SEK = 11.7 cents).

Electricity here is 220V, so I recommend bringing a converter in order to use the outlets. Almost all modern appliances will not require a transformer. I also recommend bringing some rain gear and good walking shoes, as you will be doing a considerable amount of walking every day. The weather starts to improve in mid-April, but otherwise is quite similar to the weather in Minneapolis.

Arrival (Grade: 5)

I arrived in Stockholm on a Tuesday morning; I recommend arriving sometime mid-week (as opposed to the weekend) and leaving at least one extra weekday after arriving, as it is much easier to travel around the city when everything is open and trains come more frequently. There are a few airports in the Stockholm area (Bromma, Skavsta, Västerås, and Arlanda), with Arlanda being the most convenient by far.

At the airport, I bought a bus ticket (Flygbussarna) at the information desk, which was discounted because prior to arriving I purchased an ISIC card from STA Travel (I highly recommend doing this, it allows access to many discounts when traveling – much cheaper than the prices listed in Ryan Groeschl's summary). There is also an express train from the airport to the Centralstation (Arlanda Express), which is actually quite reasonably priced if you have the ISIC card – just a dollar or so more than the bus, and twice as fast.

My global friend, Monica, met me at Stockholm Centralstation/T-Centralen, where the buses and trains from Arlanda airport arrive. She helped me with my luggage, guided me in purchasing a 30-day all-access (busses, subway/Tunnelbana, and pendeltåg—the suburban train) public transportation pass for my time here (from the SL center at T-Centralen, again the ISIC card offers a huge discount over regular price), and later in the day showed me all the important places around my dorm – including the grocery store, a workout facility, and the train station where I would leave each morning on my way to the hospital. You can actually get to and from Arlanda airport with this pass using just SL transportation (in a sense, “free”, as opposed to paying to take the bus or Arlanda Express).

I paid the monthly rent for the dorm room (this can be done on the KI Solna campus, or at any Tobak shop for a small fee if using a credit card), and later went to the Karolinska Institute Solna campus in order to meet with the International Student Coordinator, Magdalena Palmqvist, who went through some paperwork with me. I then received a KI photo identification badge (at the KI Solna University library), and was ready to begin the rotation.

Studies (Grade: 4)

I was enrolled in the Neurology Externship at KI Huddinge for four weeks during March-April, 2009. Every day, I took the pendeltåg from the Stockholms Södra station (I lived at Jägargatan 20, one of a few international student dorms) just a few blocks from the dorm, taking the train to the Flemingsberg stop (note this is one stop **after** the Huddinge stop). This is exactly a 15-minute train ride.

On the first day, I met with Dr. Fredrikson in his office. It is somewhat difficult to find the Neurology Department in the hospital, but there is an information desk with very helpful attendants to direct you. He directed me and the other international student on the rotation (from Chile) to the

lockerroom , and later showed us where the Neurology clinic and wards were. From then on, I would go directly to whichever area I was assigned for that week.

There are 3 wards and 1 clinic, plus the Neurology area in the emergency department that students can rotate through. These include a stroke unit, a general inpatient unit, and a weekday-only unit (utilized to speed diagnostic investigations). I usually spent most of the week on one ward each, with some time in the ED when the patient load was small or the residents had only paperwork to do—in Swedish.

I saw a tremendous variety of cases during the rotation, ranging from simple migraine headaches, to diagnosing patients with multiple sclerosis, to caring for patients with ALS in their last days of life. I really came in with no idea of what to expect; I assumed it would be similar to medicine in the United States, and on the whole, it is quite similar. There are a few differences, obviously, but in the end, patients in both countries receive excellent medical care.

First, the hospital in Huddinge is enormous. At times it appears there is almost more room than is necessary – which is a good problem to have. In the US, it is rare to have an entire ward devoted strictly to patients with neurological problems; here, there are 3 such wards. Also, the idea of having a wards open on weekdays only is something I have never encountered before – in practice, though, it seems like it does not work quite as intended. Many patients are happy to be able to go home on the weekends, but frequently they must return the following Monday for continued studies. The interaction between residents and attending physicians is quite similar to that in the United States, with the resident running the team and the attending offering advice and input when needed.

A major difference, however, lies in the role medical students play. Here in Sweden, medical students enroll in the neurology externship late in their fourth year of study (of a total of 5.5 years). Yet, during my four weeks on this rotation, I interacted with KI medical students on a very infrequent basis. They typically spend 1-2 hours on the wards, and for only a few days a week. They do not have patient care responsibilities, and generally are present mainly for physical diagnosis rounds. The rest of their time is spent in lectures. This came as a bit of a surprise, however medical education has a completely different structure here – much of their learning on the wards occurs during the required two-year internship after medical school.

The residents were incredibly nice while I was on the wards, and they spoke English as much as possible, even offering to conduct rounds in English on a few occasions. Most of the younger patients speak very good English, and so I frequently went through the history and physical exam with them. The residents were also very keen to get me involved in procedures – I conducted 6 lumbar punctures and a placed a few arterial lines during the rotation. Every day, we attended radiology rounds, reviewing imaging from patients on all wards. Some days, special lectures were scheduled, and often the residents would summarize each slide for me if it was in Swedish. On slower days, I would spend time in the emergency department, seeing patients and working with residents to decide on what tests to conduct and developing a differential diagnosis. Attending physicians frequently would stop us and provide short teaching sessions that were quite beneficial.

During this rotation, I definitely felt like part of the treatment team, and was included in key conversations and decisions regarding patient care. At the same time, residents were quite eager to offer advice about fun things to do in Stockholm.

Language (Grade: 4)

Unfortunately, the schedule of my rotation did not overlap well with the Swedish language courses offered. All courses were full at the time, and the next courses didn't start until my last few days in Sweden. There were a few days when mostly Swedish was spoken while at work – which is entirely expected, of course. Normally, though, the residents and patients would speak English whenever possible, making sure I knew what was happening. I was surprised, however, at how much Swedish I could understand when the rotation ended.

Living in the international student dorm, obviously many languages were spoken by the students. However, literally everyone there spoke English, making it quite easy to make friends.

Accommodation (Grade: 5)

I was assigned to live at Jägargatan 20, an international student dorm located on Södermalm. It is in a very residential area, and is actually connected to a different hospital, Södersjukhuset. This was a fantastic living arrangement, as the dorm is full of other visiting students to the Karolinska Institute, from all parts of the world. Everyone is incredibly friendly, and people frequently do fun activities together (including international food nights, weekend cruises to surrounding countries, and simply going to local bars and clubs). The dorm is very clean, with wireless internet access and furnished rooms, kitchens (pots, pans, utensils, and storage lockers and freezer space provided), laundry facilities (free washer and drier, an iron and ironing board are provided as well) and living rooms. Each floor has a common bathroom and shower area, and they are always very clean. Residents of a floor typically eat together and talk most of the night (there are some students here deep in Masters and Ph.D. degrees who have to work quite often, however).

I would suggest bringing a pillowcase and sheets, as well as a duvet cover (twin bed with pillow and comforter provided), as well as your own towels, and a clock. These items are rather expensive in Sweden. You will also have to purchase your own laundry detergent. Don't forget to bring a converter for the outlets.

Leisure and Social Activities (Grade: 5)

I cannot stress how much fun I had in Stockholm during my short stay here; I would have loved to stay for many more weeks. The Global Friends group is quite active, often attending sporting events, going on museum tours, and having get-togethers with food and drinks. My global friend in particular was incredibly friendly, inviting me and a few other students to a party at one of her friend's houses in the suburbs of Stockholm. We also attended a fashion show in which a friend of my global friend had a few designs being displayed. Stockholm is a very beautiful city and is quite walkable, while also having one of the best public transportation systems in the world. Fitness is very important in Sweden, and as a student at KI you have free access to the student gym on the Huddinge campus. There are also many running/biking trails around the island, often with designated bike lanes.

When going out to bars, people are quite friendly, and often like to hear about what life is like back in the United States. Many Swedes know a little bit about Minnesota, being a major living site of Swedes outside of Sweden. On Friday afternoons, there is a social hour on the KI Solna campus in the medical student lounge; a high number of medical students (usually underclassmen) attend this. It is

quite easy to get between the Solna and Huddinge campuses, as there is a free shuttle that runs every 20 minutes.

Stockholm has many, many very interesting museums and attractions; I recommend looking in a travel guide to find a few that suit your interests. There are also a lot of day (or multi-day) trips around Stockholm, with easy access by train or cruise ship. Many students visit these sites (I did not have a chance to), and say it was quite enjoyable.

Summary (Grade: 5)

I had a wonderful time in Stockholm while at the Karolinska Institute – Huddinge, and only wish that I had more time here. There are so many opportunities here, particularly for students. Not only is it eye-opening to live and learn in a foreign country, but at the same time you are forced to reflect and examine who you are and where you come from. I would absolutely recommend this rotation to anyone interested.