

Stop formation of the second skeleton – fighting FOP

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During the first six months of my master programme, I told everyone 'I want to go anywhere for my internship abroad, as long as it's not in the US!'. So where did I go? Boston, MA, USA. Via my previous supervisor I got an offer to join Paul Yu's lab at Harvard Medical School and work on a project that intrigued me too much to deny. From October 2015 to May 2016 I tried to unravel the mechanisms behind the dysregulated signaling of BMP and TGF- β in Fibrodysplasia Ossificans Progressiva, a rare genetic disease where your muscles progressively evolve into bone.

Considering I would be in Boston all seasons except summer, I expected to freeze to death after hearing all horror stories about the three meters snow the winter before. However, lucky me experienced Boston's mildest winter ever, with 20°C on Christmas eve and no more than 30 cm of snow during the entire winter. So even in winter time, it was no problem going out and explore Boston and its surroundings. And by its surroundings I pretty much mean the rest of the US, as I traveled to Chicago (IL), Madison (WI), the Niagara Falls (NY), Miami (FL) and Washington DC (DC). Now I was in the US anyways, everything was relatively close so I took that chance to go as many places as possible.

Besides all travel adventures, there was plenty of work to be done. I worked in a small lab, with people from various nationalities – mainly Eastern Europe and Asia. Actually, no one was truly American. This led to nice conversations about all advantages and disadvantages of living in the US. The work was for me a nice combination between familiar techniques and things that were completely new. One of those were animal experiments, which was a really interesting experience as regulations in the Netherlands are more stringent so I wouldn't have been allowed to do as much as here.

Another amazing opportunity I got was attending a conference in Livorno, Italy. Here I got the chance to meet everyone in the field, listen to interesting talks and meet many of the Italian patients. For me, this was very inspiring as you see how affected (but still happy!) the patients are and how much their quality of life could be improved if any medication would be developed.

All in all, I had an amazing time in Boston. Not only would I like to thank my PI, my lab mates and the people I met, or already knew, in Boston, but of course also the Nora Baart Stichting for their financial support. To all students still looking for a position abroad, just go to a country you didn't even consider, because even I can say that the US wasn't that bad after all.



Top: Brunch with fellow MMDs in Boston. I'm at the front right.
Bottom: Dinner with lab members. I'm at the back right.