

nursing home accommodation is less expensive than good mental hospital accommodation.

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Research opportunities in the USA

DEAR SIRS

The benefit of a full-time research post is being increasingly recognised as an essential part in the training of a consultant psychiatrist. The possibility of pursuing such research abroad adds to its value. The United States leads the field in many areas and abounds with special research centres, many of which are attached to major universities, attracting the very best of academic professionals. While entry to and working in the US may be fraught with difficulties, acquiring a position as a Post Doctoral Research Fellow is not as difficult as it first seems.

In June 1989 I decided to begin my quest in searching for a research opportunity in Stanford University, California. The Centre for Sleep Disorders, the Eating Disorder Unit attached to the Behavioural Science Department and the Child Psychiatry Department were the main areas in which I was interested. I wrote to all of them, along with letters to many other units, requesting information about the possibility of working there. I received no replies.

Not discouraged by the lack of response, I arrived in the US in September and made appointments to see each of the heads of departments. My first meeting with Dr Gullimineault in the Sleep Centre resulted in an offer of a non-funded fellowship with the promise of a grant application the following year. I could contribute to ongoing research or set up my own project, along with attending various seminars, lectures, tutorials etc. I decided to start working voluntarily while continuing to look for a more organised programme. There was also a possibility of working in the genetics unit of the Child Psychiatry Department, again initially on a voluntary basis. Departmental heads are only too pleased to recruit foreign doctors to help in their ongoing research if it can begin on a voluntary basis. Once you become established and valued in the unit it is unlikely that you will not receive a stipend at some stage.

In November I was successful in obtaining a three year fellowship programme with Professor Agras in the Eating Disorder Unit. This was a full-time salaried research position co-ordinating and manag-

ing a research project for which they had received funding. It entailed a multi-million dollar budget (as many American federally funded projects do) and therefore required a lot of administrative as well as clinical and research skills. My first task in preparing for this was to complete a three month computer course and later a statistical course. These were readily made available to me by the Department. I was also able to include some of my own research interests in the protocol.

Being a fellow on an official programme allows you to avail yourself of other academic facilities offered by the university, including lectures, courses and conferences. Salaries are low, ranging from \$15,000–\$25,000. The holiday entitlement for a Fellow is at the discretion of your sponsor but is usually three weeks per year. Paid maternity leave is also possible—six weeks being the norm. Being a student entitles you to free library facilities and medical insurance coverage which is otherwise expensive. It also allows you the use of all university facilities along with the option of attending any university courses which may be of interest. While you are officially entitled to campus housing, due to the vast number of students, both undergraduate and post-graduate, it is not always possible to obtain. Accommodation is, however, readily available at commercial rates in the nearby area. At the end of the programme you graduate with the other students and receive a certificate of completion.

Passing the ECFMG (formerly called the FLEX exam) is not essential for a research position, but is required if you are considering any clinical work which requires treatment of patients. Specific courses are organised in the States for candidates taking the exam and are especially useful.

Entry into the US requires a visa; if you have not arranged your fellowship in advance, you may enter on a tourist visa and wait for the University to sponsor you for a J-1 visa. If your spouse has a J-1 visa you are entitled to a J-2 which may be exchanged for a J-1 at a later date.

Up to one year's senior registrar accreditation may be given by the Joint Committee on Higher Psychiatric Training if the position is as a full-time researcher. The research project may also be written up for either an MD or PhD.

My advice to colleagues wishing to avail themselves of research opportunities in the US is to persevere, appear in person, and be willing to start on a voluntary basis. Your application should be successful and you will thoroughly enjoy and gain from your experience there.

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