

At the halfway mark: A firsthand account of the Eupati expert training

Our EUPATI Switzerland President, Hansruedi Voekle, is one of four Swiss-based representatives undergoing the Eupati expert training from 2017 to end-2018. Read his reflections on the learning process at the halfway mark, when he got to meet his fellow trainees from all across Europe.

Hard work, but extremely motivating

In summer 2017, I applied for the 3rd Eupati Expert Training Course, set to run from September 2017 to end-2018. After registration and the official opening of the course, I started with e-learning. I was already familiar with Moodle, the online learning platform, but only as a teacher since I was lecturing physics for many years at my university. Now, I had to deal with it as a student. Daily e-learning on the different modules and lessons meant hard work, but it was extremely motivating for me. During the following months, I had to go through Modules 1-3 and parts of Modules 4 and 5, totalling some 100 hours of study for the first half of the course alone. Having fulfilled these conditions, I was admitted to the face-to-face (F2F) meeting scheduled for end-February 2018 in Madrid.

Solid learning in Madrid, with spicy topics

Thus far, I learned a lot on research and manufacturing of medicinal products, on the different testing procedures in laboratory and in animal experiments and, what concerns us most as patients, on clinical testing and its different phases (I, II, III, and IV), as well as how these phases are planned, approved, reviewed, evaluated, and finally how the drugs are licensed for the market.

Spicy topics were: statistics, ethics, blinding, randomization, biomarkers, pharmacodynamics versus pharmacokinetics, stratified and personalized medicine, rare diseases and orphan drugs, bioavailability, bioequivalence, galenic formulation and administration of drugs, efficacy, safety, security, evidence, pharmacogenetics versus pharmacogenomics, the role of national and European bodies and authorities. Finally, there was the potential participation of us as patients and representatives of patient organizations, through these stages.

Meeting my peers in Madrid: cultural, linguistic diversity and amazing cooperation

So at end-February, I met the 53 other fellow trainees, from 27 European countries and our teachers, and our trainers and monitors. The three-day meeting was intense and stimulating, yet demanding. It was well-structured and balanced between teaching and interactive work. The cultural and linguistic diversity of Europe and the way we are able to cooperate, notwithstanding, is amazing.

Role play to practise being in an ethics committee

Of great interest was the role play we did on approval of clinical tests, as they showed the different interests and point of view of industries, authorities, ethics committees, and patient representatives. Participating as a patient representative in an ethics committee for approval processes of clinical trials is a demanding challenge, as many of us are familiar only with our particular disease and its treatment options. We are not expected to represent our disease or our organization only, however, but rather the interests of all patients.

To be able to participate actively in such ethical debates calls for intense preparation (potentially, training on lay summaries and advocacy would be helpful), thorough study of the relevant documents, and maintaining strict confidentiality throughout. Partaking in such a committee requires a sense of constructive collaboration and a mind that is open to solidarity and engagement. The job of these committees is not to be a fly in the ointment (i.e. to impede a clinical trial). Rather, it is to contribute to trial optimization, in terms of respect for the rights, security, and protection of participants. It is also to consider the potential benefit to those will receive the investigated drug will gain later on, post-trial.

Now I will attack the second half of the e-learning and look forward to the final F2F meeting in September 2018. I hope by these few lines to motivate future candidates to consider taking this extremely valuable EUPATI Expert training course.

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