

Chris O'Brien Travelling Scholarship 2nd of January to the 23rd of January 2010

The American Head Neck Society and the Australian and New Zealand Head Neck Society have created a joint award to honour Professor Chris O'Brien in order to foster ongoing education and research between our two continents. This scholarship will be awarded every 2 years and alternate between Australia, New Zealand and North America. In 2008 I had the great honour and privilege of being nominated and chosen as the inaugural "Chris O'Brien Travelling Scholar". I was presented with this award at the annual meeting of the American Head Neck Society in Phoenix in 2009. My itinerary included 3 major head and neck cancer centres in both the US and Canada for a period of 3 weeks. These included Memorial Sloan Kettering, New York, the Wharton Head Neck Cancer Centre, Toronto and MD Anderson, Houston.

My trip commenced on the 2nd of January 2010. I arrived in a very chilly New York City. After overcoming jetlag I attended the Head Neck Cancer Service at MSKCC, where I was warmly welcomed by Dr Ashok Shaha and his faculty. On my first day I joined Dr Dennis Kraus in his clinic seeing a wide variety of very interesting pathology. In the afternoon I attended the operating rooms where I observed Dr Shaha and Dr Wong perform both primary and revision thyroid surgery. On my first evening I attended an ice hockey match between the New York Rangers and the Boston Bruins at Madison Square Gardens with Dr Dan Novakovic, who was our registrar at Westmead Hospital in 2008. He is currently undertaking a laryngology fellowship with Dr Andrew Blitzer at St Luke's Roosevelt Hospital. On Tuesday and Wednesday I spent my time in the outpatient clinics and operating room. On Wednesday evening I was invited to attend a dinner with the Head and Neck Surgery Faculty. I was pleased that Dr Suren Krishnan and his wife, who were spending their holiday in New York, could attend this event. I presented Grand Rounds on Thursday on the topic of "Contemporary management of metastatic cutaneous scc of the head and neck". Following my presentation the fellows took me for a ward round where a number of clinical cases were discussed. In the afternoon I gave a presentation on "Transoral laser surgery of early vocal cord cancer" at a teaching session. On Friday I had the great pleasure of attending a clinic by Dr Michael Tuttle, who is a world renowned thyroid endocrinologist. This was a most informative day during which I was exposed to the most complex cases of recurrent and aggressive thyroid cancer pathology. I gained great insights into Dr Tuttle's thinking and approach to the management of these most difficult and challenging cases. I would highly recommend a visit with Dr Tuttle to anyone planning a career in thyroid surgery. During the weekend I had the opportunity to spend time with long time family friends in New Jersey. On Monday and Tuesday I spent time with Dr Andrew Blitzer, St Luke's Roosevelt Hospital and Dr Lucian Sulica, Connell Medical Centre who are both well respected Laryngologists. I observed a number of outpatient procedures including the transnasal laser treatment of laryngeal dysplasia and botox injection for patients with spasmodic dysphonia. Dr Blitzer and Dr Sulica were both very welcoming and most generous with their knowledge. During the previous week I also had the opportunity to meet with Dr Marshall Strome, who is well known for having performed a laryngeal transplant.

On Wednesday the 13th of January, I left New York for Toronto, which I consider my second home having spent a significant time there during my fellowship in 2002 and 2003. On arrival I met up with Drs Patrick Gullane and Ralph Gilbert and spent a great evening in one of the local pubs. The itinerary as expected was very busy and the schedule was tight. I attended the operating theatres on Thursday and observed my old mentors in action. As usual they were facing a large skin cancer invading the pinna. This was routinely excised and promptly reconstructed using a local flap. It was a wonderful opportunity to catch up with colleagues, nurses and chat with the fellows. In the afternoon I led a teaching session for the fellows of the head neck program and was presented with a number of challenging cases. This was a very fruitful and enjoyable session. In the evening the faculty dinner was held at Baton Rouge, which is my favourite rib restaurant in Toronto. Both my wife and I grew very fond of this place with the great food and relaxed atmosphere, especially during the harsh Toronto winters. This dinner was attended by all the fellows. The next morning I presented grand rounds to the Faculty of the Department of Otolaryngology, University of Toronto on my experience with

transoral laser surgery of early vocal cord cancer. The content of my talk included discussion on the challenge of setting up an endoscopic laser service and my personal experience of treating over 70 cases of early larynx cancer. I was also pleased to present my outcomes in terms of controlling the disease, function in terms of voice and overall quality of life. During the morning I was kept busy attending the core teaching session for residents in training. This took the form of case discussions during which I could share some of our approach to teaching Otolaryngology in Australia. In the afternoon I spent time with my mentor and friend Dr Ralph Gilbert. He is one of the most influential people in my career in head and neck surgery. Dr Gilbert is a great teacher, outstanding clinician, researcher and innovator and he excels when "Thinking outside of the box ". It is indeed a great honour and privilege to have been trained by him.

It was a wonderful time catching up with all the staff in Toronto and no more so than with Dr Patrick Gullane. He has recently had the great honour of being awarded the Order of Canada. Pat has made an outstanding contribution in the field of otolaryngology head and neck surgery. This is most significantly self-evident in his passing on his knowledge and vast experience to an entire generation of young head neck surgeons like myself all over the world. I have great affection for Pat and without his help I would not be in the position that I am in today. I truly understand now his great affection for his mentor, Dr John Conley , one of the greats in head & neck. .

I spent the last few hours in Toronto having breakfast with another of my mentors, Dr Jeremy Freeman. Jeremy is a great friend and I thoroughly enjoyed my brief time with him over a couple of cream cheese and salmon bagels.

On Saturday, the 16th of January I flew to Houston, Texas, my last stop on this journey. I had heard a lot about MD Anderson, and I have met a number of their fellows and faculty on previous trips. I must admit I was slightly anxious given the great reputation of this institution. I was pleased that it was warmer in Houston. I was greeted by great Texan hospitality when I was picked up from the airport by Shirley's Towncars, generously organised by Dr Weber. On Sunday I met up with Dr Randal Weber and his wife. They made me feel very welcome and we had a great TEXMEX dinner at one of the local restaurants. Monday was Martin Luther Day and a public holiday. Dr Weber generously donated his time, took me for lunch at a great Texan Barbecue Restaurant and showed me the enormous complex that is MD Anderson and its surrounding hospitals. I have never seen a larger and more concentrated medical precinct. MD Anderson is made up of many high rise buildings all connected by enormous above ground walkways. Dr Weber explained that the budget for MD Anderson per annum alone exceeds US \$ 3 billion. Many other hospitals are located within the vicinity and include Baylor Medical College, Methodist, Ben Tauber, Herman Memorial and Texas Childrens Hospital. On Tuesday I met up at the head neck cancer service offices where I was greeted by Ms Tina Camacho, who had organised my entire time right down to the last minute. I was provided with my own lab coat, detailed itinerary and map to get around this vast institution. She kindly showed me around including the operating room and head neck clinic. There are in total 12 head neck surgeons, 4 clinical fellows, 7 residents and 11 physician assistants. In addition the speech therapy department, which is part of the head neck services, is headed by the very enthusiastic and dynamic Professor Jan Lewin and a team of 8 speech therapists. Clinics run every morning and afternoon and there are 4 operating rooms performing head neck surgery every day. The service has a strong commitment to basic science research. This is run by Professor Jeffrey Meyers and a team of clinicians and research scientists. There are 5 laboratories each with significant bench space and conference facilities.

On my first clinical day I attended Dr Weber's and Dr Hanna's head neck clinic. In the afternoon I gave my talk on transoral laser surgery to the entire faculty. In the evening I was invited to dinner with some of the surgeons including Dr Gary Clayman, Dr Chris Holsinger and Dr Jefferey Myers. On Wednesday I attended the operating suite and in the evening I presented grand rounds on the management of metastatic cutaneous scc of the head neck. During the next two days I spent my time in the outpatients and operating room. I had the great opportunity to meet with a number of the faculty for one on one discussion. On Thursday I met up with Professor Kian Ang who was very generous in showing me the radiation oncology unit. This was most impressive and is in a separate part of the institution

and is very similar in size to the head neck services with extensive clinical, conference and research facilities. On my last day I spent time with the fellows and was able to share in their experience and gain insight into the training they receive at MD Anderson. The fellowship runs for 2 years with time spent both in clinical areas as well as dedicated research time spent in the basic science labs. I left back for Australia on Saturday the 23rd of January.

This trip was one of the most intense and amazing experiences in my professional life as a head and neck surgeon. I was exposed to some of the most extraordinary and impressive institutions anywhere in the world. It was a great privilege and honour to spend time with the world leaders in head neck oncology. I gained a great experience in being able to discuss and participate at all levels of head and neck oncology practice. Presenting our own data and some of the work that I have been involved with to some of the most recognized and well respected clinicians was at first slightly daunting and overwhelming. But having survived this experience it has made me more determined to continue our work, participate in research and endeavour to share our knowledge.

Our system in Australia is quite different to what I encountered during this trip. This knowledge is not new to me as I had spent my fellowship in Toronto, but the differences and challenges were reinforced given my last 5 years experience in a head neck practice in Sydney. It is easy to be disappointed in the failings of our system when you travel abroad but I feel that the most significant resource we have are our clinicians themselves and the dedication they show when managing patients with some of the most complex and challenging medical conditions. We can feel proud and comfortable in the knowledge that our clinicians are highly trained and of a world class standard. Our major challenge is to continue and elaborate on the work given the difficult climate within which we practice. The greatest advantage of the institutions that I have been privileged to visit are the concentrated resources that are available to them in order to achieve excellence. The question remains of how we are to improve our approach. This is the challenge that we have to meet in the future. The first step is to embrace this association with North America and fully support the "Chris O'Brien Traveling Scholar" Award. We need to fully support this scholarship and open up our institutions, share our experience and warmly embrace future recipients from North America so we can continue the great spirit that exists between our 2 continents.

I would like to give thanks to both the Australian and New Zealand Head and Neck Society and the American Head and Neck Society for bestowing this great honour on me. A great thank you goes to all the members of the head and neck faculty at Memorial Sloan Kettering, University of Toronto and MD Anderson for their generosity and for making me feel so welcome. I would also like to acknowledge all the people that have trained me and influenced me in my career. This foremost includes all my teachers and colleagues at Westmead Hospital. Importantly it includes Professor Patrick Gullane and his faculty who generously trained me and continue to support my career. Most importantly I would like to thank Professor Chris O'Brien, who gave me the opportunity to embark on a career in head and neck. Without his integral involvement, support and belief in me I would have never had the great opportunities and experiences that I had and continue to enjoy today.

Carsten E Palme FRACS