

Medical Students Exchange Program Organized by Croatian Medical Students International Committee, 1996–2000

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Aim. To assess the interest of Croatian medical students in going to foreign countries and foreign medical students' interest in coming to Croatia for one-month professional and research clerkship in the period from 1996 to 2000.

Method. Data were obtained from contracts between Croatian Medical Students' International Committee and other National Member Organizations of the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations; from student Application forms; reports of the Local Committees of Croatian Medical Students' International Committee summed up in a Statistical form and used for statistical analysis in the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations; and from Cards of acceptance and Cards of confirmation.

Results. The number of available bilateral exchange places increased from 28 in 1996 to 66 in 1999. Croatian students going for clerkship abroad used 65.8% of available places and foreign students realized 59.3% of all places available in Croatia. Most of the exchange students chose clinical, whereas only a small number chose preclinical clerkship. The most visited were the departments of medicine and general surgery. All the students preferred doing their clerkships in August. Most foreign students came from Italy, Spain, Slovakia, and Hungary. Croatian students preferred to go to Italy, Spain, Egypt, and Finland.

Conclusion. Political problems strongly affected students' interest in doing clerkship in a certain country. Croatia needs to attract more students from different countries and to increase the interest of Croatian students in doing clerkship in Eastern European countries.

Key words: *clinical clerkship; Croatia; education, medical, undergraduate; international educational exchange; students, medical*

The International Federation of Medical Students' Associations is an independent organization founded in 1951; through its National Member Organizations it promotes international cooperation in the field of medical education, public health, reproductive health, and, most importantly, professional and research exchange among medical students all over the world (1). Officers of all National Member Organizations meet at their General Assembly, regularly held in August every year, when the contracts for exchange places for the oncoming year are signed, and at the Exchange Officers' Meeting in March every year, when students' application forms for current year are exchanged (2).

The Croatian Medical Students' International Committee has been a full member of the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations since 1992, when it was founded by medical students from Rijeka and Zagreb. Shortly after that, only Rijeka Medical School has remained active. In 1996, a new statute was made accord-

ing to the Constitution of International Federation of Medical Students' Associations, and adjusted to the Croatian law (3). The same year, students from Zagreb Medical School joined the Croatian Medical Students' International Committee again and students from Osijek Medical School joined it a year later. Split Medical School joined the Croatian Medical Students' International Committee in the fall of 2000. Today, the Croatian Medical Students' International Committee is a nonpolitical, non-profit, independent association of Croatian medical students with four Local Committees (Rijeka, Zagreb, Osijek, Split), and its headquarters are in Rijeka.

Croatian Medical Students' International Committee's oldest and most important project in cooperation with other National Member Organizations of the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations is the medical students' exchange program. It has been running since 1994 but, due to technical reasons, data before 1996

were not complete. The officers from all Local Committees meet at the Croatian Medical Students' International Committee's Assembly in October every year to distribute the available exchange places among the four Local Committees, with Rijeka and Zagreb Local Committees getting 35% of available places each, and Osijek and Split Local Committees getting 15% of available places each, as defined by the Croatian Medical Students' International Committee's statute (4). Participation of each Local Committee in Croatian Medical Students' International Committee's membership fee in International Federation of Medical Students' Associations coincides with the percentage of exchange places for each Local Committee (4).

Before Split Medical School joined in, the Local Committees of Rijeka, Zagreb, and Osijek had 45%:45%:10% of the exchange places available, respectively.

A medical student can choose either a professional or elective type of exchange. Professional type of exchange means simple clinical rotation, whereas elective means joining a scientific project in preclinical research (5). Exchange conditions are defined by each organization according to general points given by the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (6).

The aim of this study is to assess the interest of Croatian medical students in doing clerkships in foreign countries and foreign medical students' interest in coming to Croatia in the period from 1996 to 2000 and to analyze the influence of the political problems on their decisions.

Material and Methods

Data Sources

We analyzed the following documents:

(a) Contracts between Croatian Medical Students' International Committee and other National Member Organizations, which contain period of validity, names of two countries involved, names of the associations, number of coming and leaving units for each country, exchange conditions of each association, date, signatures of both national exchange officers or national officers for research exchange, and official stamps (7). Contracts are valid for one year.

(b) Application forms filled out by the students applying for clerkships, which contain general information about student and his or her Medical School, year of entering the School, expected date of graduation, desired country of clerkship, desired Medical School, desired department (professional exchange) or elective project (research exchange), desired type of clerkship (clinical or preclinical), and period of clerkship.

(c) Reports of the Local Committees of Croatian Medical Students' International Committee on the basis of which Statistics

forms were filled out and submitted to the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations officials to be used for statistics of International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (8).

(d) Cards of confirmation which were sent by incoming students prior to their arrival to confirm and specify the exact date and time of their arrival and means of travel. Before that, they have to be officially accepted for clerkship by the hosting country, which sends them the Card of acceptance (9).

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics was applied to show the distribution of available and the number of realized exchange places; the popularity of visited departments; distribution of countries to which Croatian students depart and those which foreign students come from, as well as the most suitable months for doing a clerkship.

Results

The number of available exchange places rose from 28 in 1996 to 66 in 1999. The greatest number of vacancies for Croatian medical students was 13 (20%) in 1999 due to a larger number of contracts signed with the Eastern European countries. The year 1999 also brought the greatest number of vacancies in Croatia (27 or 41%) and the lowest number of exchanges realized by foreign students (39%), due to the NATO intervention in Kosovo. In total, Croatian students going for clerkship used 66% of places available, and foreign students realized 59% of all exchange places available in Croatia (Table 1).

Departments of medicine (28% of all students) and general surgery (22% of all students) were favorite departments of both Croatian and foreign students. Croatian students going abroad preferred to do their clerkships at departments of medicine, whereas foreign students coming to Croatia mainly chose departments of general surgery. Only 13 (4%) of all students chose preclinical departments (Table 2). Research exchanges were chosen by only 17% of the students; the rest of the students preferred professional exchange.

Croatian students did their clerkships in August, September, and October, and foreign students preferred July and August (Table 3).

Croatian students mostly chose Italy, Spain, Egypt and Finland for doing their clerkships. Most incoming students were from Italy, Spain, Slovakia, and Hungary (Table 4).

Discussion

The students could choose between clinical and pre-clinical departments to do their clerkship but most of them chose clinical departments. The reason why departments of medicine and general surgery were the most visited

Table 1. Distribution of available and realized exchanges between Croatian Medical Students International Committee and other National Member Organizations of International Federation of Medical Students' Associations from 1996 to 2000

Year	No. of exchange places available	Departures			Arrivals		
		No. of applications	No. (%) of applicants	No. (%) of realized exchanges	No. of applications	No. (%) of applicants	No. (%) of realized exchanges
1996	28	0	28 (100)	25 (89)	11	17 (61)	17 (61)
1997	51	6	45 (88)	27 (53)	17	34 (67)	27 (53)
1998	51	6	45 (88)	31 (61)	6	45 (88)	38 (75)
1999	66	13	53 (80)	41 (62)	27	39 (59)	26 (39)
2000	35	2	33 (94)	28 (80)	1	34 (97)	29 (83)
Total	231	27	204 (88)	152 (66)	62	169 (73)	137 (59)

Table 2. Distribution of available and realized exchanges between Croatian Medical Students International Committee and other National Member Organizations of International Federation of Medical Students' Associations from 1996 to 2000

Department	Departure		Arrival	
	No.	%	No.	%
Anatomy	0	0.0	1	0.7
Anaesthesiology	1	0.7	6	4.4
Biology	0	0.0	1	0.7
Dermatology	3	2.0	1	0.7
Emergency Room	3	2.0	9	6.6
Pharmacology	3	2.0	0	0.0
Gynecology	1	0.7	10	7.3
Immunology	1	0.7	2	1.5
Infectious diseases	6	3.9	1	0.7
Internal medicine	46	30.3	34	24.8
Maxillofacial surgery	0	0.0	1	0.7
Neurology	1	0.7	4	2.9
Neurosurgery	2	1.3	1	0.7
Ophthalmology	0	0.0	1	0.7
ENT	1	0.7	0	0.7
Orthopaedics	5	3.3	1	0.7
Pediatrics	14	9.2	4	2.9
Pathology	3	2.0	2	1.5
Psychiatry	0	0.0	1	0.7
Radiology	2	1.3	1	0.7
Surgery	27	17.8	37	27.0
Other ^a	33	21.7	19	13.9
Total	152	100.0	137	100.0

^aData not available.

ones was because they cover the widest field of clinical medicine and can offer many different cases. Other departments that focus on specific medical fields were mostly visited by students who had certain interest in them and wanted to work in that branch in future. Some departments, especially smaller or preclinical ones, limit the number of students they are willing to host. The majority of students who applied for clerkships had already

Table 3. Distribution of realized clerkships between Croatian Medical Students' International Committee and other National Member Organizations of International Federation of Medical Students' Associations according to the months of the year

Month	Departure	Arrival
January	0	1
February	12	0
March	2	0
April	1	2
May	0	0
June	5	4
July	13	51
August	78	64
September	14	10
October	18	2
November	3	1
December	1	1

Table 4. Distribution of countries to which Croatian medical students departed and from which foreign students arrived to Croatia from 1996 to 2000

Country	Departed to	Arrived from
Austria	2	0
Brasil	4	0
Bulgaria	1	0
Czech Republic	4	6
Egypt	15	3
Finland	10	6
Germany	7	3
Grece	2	2
Hungary	6	8
Italy	33	33
Lithuania	9	8
Macedonia	0	2
Malta	4	2
Netherlands	5	6
Norway	2	1
Poland	2	4
Portugal	1	0
Romania	0	1
Russia	0	5
Slovakia	7	13
Slovenia	8	2
Spain	26	25
Sweden	2	3
Turkey	3	2
Ukraine	0	1

finished some of their clinical studies, probably due to the request of hosting departments about the clinical course being completed or the examination passed. The older students have higher level of knowledge and therefore more use of clerkships. The criteria of Croatian Local Committees for Croatian students to get clerkships are much in favor of older students. This is carried out by giving extra points for each year of study and subtracting points for any prior attendance of clerkship. The Osijek Local Committee even has the condition that the exchanges are available only to students of the fourth, fifth, and sixth year of medical studies. Although the official language is English, the students get accepted for exchange if they speak only the language of the host country or another language set by the department. For example, some departments in Rijeka accept students speaking Italian, and some departments in Osijek accept students speaking Hungarian (10). In spite of this, it was never noticed that students from the addressed countries come to these cities more than to others.

In general, the most popular period of year for doing clerkship is the third trimenon – a vacation period, unlike the first, second, and fourth, which are nearly equal. Other than that, Croatian students also choose October and February for doing their clerkships because it is the examination period when there are no lectures (February, mid-June to mid-July, and September to mid-October). Another reason is that certain cities in the hosting countries are available for professional exchange just on certain months and not the whole year round. Also, the period and town for research exchanges are defined in advance by the department offering research. Croatian cities of Zagreb and Rijeka are available for professional exchange the whole year round, whereas Osijek can ac-

commodate foreign students only in July and August (10). In most cases, Croatian Medical Students' International Committee manages to accommodate the incoming students in regard to their desired period of clerkship, city, and department. When there are too many applicants for professional exchange and a certain Local Committee find it impossible to host them all, another Local Committee takes them over. Students are notified about any change in time through a Card of acceptance or e-mail.

The distribution of countries to which Croatian students departed and from which foreign students arrived to Croatia does not necessarily correspond to their popularity among the students. When national exchange officers negotiate number of places to be signed in a contract, they are led by the interest of their students in that country, meaning that the agreed number of places is the outcome of mutual interest of both countries signing the contract. In general, our experience shows that Western European countries are more popular among Croatian students. If Croatian Medical Students' International Committee were able to sign more contracts with these countries all the places offered would be occupied. This is because students see these countries as more developed and therefore able to offer better learning basis in the medical field. Other countries (eg, Egypt or Brazil) are attractive due to their totally different surroundings, culture, or history; by their excellent organization of clerkships (eg, Lithuania); or by low travel expenses and still very fine medical practice (eg, Slovenia).

The number of signed contracts has been increasing constantly from 1996 to reach its peak in 1999. It was the measure of the Croatian Medical Students' International Committee's success. The reason why the number of signed contracts for 1997 almost doubled in comparison with 1996 was the joining of Zagreb and Osijek Medical Schools to the Exchange Committee. A lot of efforts were made to strengthen the position of Croatian Medical Students' International Committee within International Federation of Medical Students' Associations and to present Croatia as a peaceful and attractive country. The exchange officers' meeting was organized in Opatija in March 1996, when 270 participants from approximately 40 countries visited Croatia and witnessed its beauty and safety. This much-praised exchange officers' meeting contributed a lot to the increased number of arrivals to and departures from Croatia, until a paradoxical decrease in arrivals in 1999, the year for which the highest number of contracts was signed. This was due to NATO intervention in Kosovo which started in-between of signing contracts for 1999 (General Assembly, August 1998) and realization of clerkships (summer 1999) (11). We were surprised at a very low number of applicants on the exchange officers' meeting in the March of 1999 and later on at a large number of cancellations in arrivals. Many students and their parents considered Croatia too close to the war zone and Croatia immediately suffered the major consequences: the number of contracts signed at the General Assembly in the August of 1999 for year 2000 fell by almost half in comparison with 1999 (Table 1). The Croatian Medical Students' International Committee lost the majority of contracts with Western European medical students' associations, which were the most popular among Croatian students. Hosting Croatian students, in combination with the lack of their stu-

dents' interest in Croatia, would have presented a direct financial loss to the Western European countries.

Because of relatively low interest of Croatian students in Eastern European countries, most vacancies or non-realized clerkships were found in these countries. Therefore, Croatian Medical Students' International Committee had to cut down the number of contracts with Eastern European countries because of its bad financial situation.

Financing and organizing board, lodging, and social time for foreign students is a one of the major problems the Croatian Medical Students' International Committee encounters. According to the rules, each party signing a bilateral contract is obliged to cover these expenses for the arriving student, irrespective if the student who departs realizes his or her clerkship (12). Sponsors see no interest in supporting clerkships financially and local medical schools help according to their possibilities, which vary from year to year. Therefore, Croatian students going abroad for clerkship have to pay a fee to help the Croatian Medical Students' International Committee cover the expenses for foreign students. The fee differs according to a current financial situation of each Local Committee but the tendency is to keep it as low as possible so the students never pay the full price.

Continuous financial support would be a great help and would definitely improve Croatian Medical Students' International Committee's offer, as would an evaluation of clerkship by foreign students. The official evaluation form of International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (13) was used for some time in the Rijeka Local Committee but it proved to be insufficient for the Croatian Medical Students' International Committee's needs. Zagreb Local Committee created its own evaluation form for the season 1999 and is working on its improvement. It is to be filled out at the end of a clerkship and requires the evaluation of quality of practical part, social life, board, and lodging.

It would be extremely important to further develop and expand the exchange program, since Croatian medical students find it very useful and interesting. It helps medical students increase their level of knowledge, gain clinical and laboratory experience through different approaches in diverse medical traditions. It is important to emphasize that the Croatian Medical Students' International Committee covers a majority of bilateral medical student exchanges in Croatia and this article presents only its work and results. Also, Croatian Medical Schools have some extra exchange places available based on a direct agreement with particular foreign Schools: six places per year at Medical School in Hamburg, Germany (Zagreb) and two to three places per year at McGill University Medical School, Montreal, Canada.

It is obvious that political moments strongly influence the way in which a country is perceived. Therefore, the Croatian Medical Students' International Committee has to work very hard to regain trust and prove that Croatia is a safe country. A lot of advertising material, like posters, booklets, and maps were distributed among our foreign colleagues at each General Assembly and exchange officers' meeting, as well as to foreign students who came for clerkship. The Croatian Medical Students' International Committee definitely needs to strengthen

its relationship with Western European medical organizations and to increase the interest of Croatian medical students in Eastern European countries.

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