

Observing Orthopaedics in Milan: Lessons Beyond the OR

This summer, I had the opportunity to complete a 4-week elective in Milan, Italy, with the orthopedic teams at Humanitas Research Hospital and Pio X Hospital. As someone with a growing interest in surgery, spending time in the operating room observing hip and knee arthroplasties, as well as upper limb trauma cases, was an exciting and invaluable experience—especially ahead of clerkship.

One of the most rewarding aspects of this elective was its longitudinal structure. I wasn't just popping into surgeries; I had the chance to follow patients through the full arc of their care—pre-operative consults, the OR, and post-op follow-ups. This continuity helped me appreciate how surgical teams collaborate over time, and how crucial every step of the process is to patient outcomes.

There were also a few pleasant surprises. For instance, I learned that in Italy, orthopedic surgeons often take on what we might consider primary care responsibilities for musculoskeletal concerns. Patients can self-refer directly to orthopedics for joint pain, injuries, or mobility issues. I watched surgeons not only make diagnoses like osteoarthritis but also order lab work, and refer to rheumatology when red flags suggested inflammatory disease. It was a fascinating look at how scope of practice and access to care differ across systems.

Beyond the hospital walls, this elective has been an immersive lesson in navigating a foreign culture. From deciphering tram schedules in Italian to adjusting to a new clinical environment, I've learned to be more adaptable, curious, and open to unfamiliar routines. And the best part? The people. The orthopedic teams I've worked with have been warm, welcoming, and incredibly generous with their time and teaching.

This observership has strengthened my clinical interests, sharpened my communication skills, and broadened my view of healthcare beyond Canada. Plus, I've confirmed what many already suspect—Italians really are some of the nicest people you'll ever meet, especially when you're lost in a hospital corridor with Google Translate open on your phone.