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Hosted by Ms. Raneer Thakar and Mr. Abdul Sultan at Croydon University Hospital, London, UK

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Dear IUGA Education Committee:

Thank you for selecting me as the recipient of the much coveted 2017 IUGA Observership Grant. I am grateful for having this wonderful learning opportunity to train with world renowned experts in urogynecology at the Croydon University Hospital in London this year. Having had the pleasure of meeting Ms. Thakar and Mr. Sultan during their PROTECT workshop at the 2017 IUGA meeting, I was inspired by their enthusiasm for teaching. My primary goal of attending this observership was to gain knowledge in the prevention, diagnosis, and management of patients suffering from obstetrical anal sphincter injuries (OASIS), but what I learned far exceeded my expectations under the mentorship of these world class experts.

The Orchid Suite at the Croydon University Hospital is a well-established tertiary care center in the care of women with pelvic floor dysfunction. Their multidisciplinary approach provides a comprehensive evaluation of women with urinary, fecal, and sexual symptoms. At the frontline of the clinic are nurses who are responsible for the initial assessment, conservative management, and when required, urodynamic testing and referral to specialists for additional evaluation. There is a collegial relationship amongst the various providers at the urogynecology clinic at both the local and regional levels. During my observership, I was able to attend clinics with Wendy, our colorectal nurse specialist, who showed me conservative management of fecal incontinence. In addition, I was welcome to join various MDT meetings with colorectal surgeons, radiologists, urologists, and other urogynecologists where complex cases were presented. Not only do these meetings offer unique perspectives, they allowed me to integrate into the clinic as a member of the team.

The highlight of the observership includes the various scan clinics looking at women with different pelvic floor dysfunctions. The perineal clinic runs at least once a week where postpartum women with recent OASIS and antepartum women in their third trimester with previous OASIS are brought in for anal manometry and endoanal ultrasound. I was demonstrated sophisticated techniques in the evaluation of anal physiology during each clinic and learned how to triage these patients to their recommended mode of delivery based on test results. In addition, at the pelvic floor scan clinic, endovaginal and transperineal ultrasounds were utilized to discretely visualize vaginal mesh implants, which I found fascinating. These scans often allowed clinicians to determine if mesh was the cause of a patient's symptoms and to plan for surgical intervention based on precise ultrasonographic measurements.

In the operating theatre, I was demonstrated techniques of vaginal hysterectomy, vaginal prolapse repairs, uterosacral ligament suspension, periurethral bulking agent and botox injections. I would like to highlight two surgical techniques that are novel to me. The first is autologous mid-urethral sling where a strip of rectus fascia is harvested in a minimally fashion and tunneled via a modified TVT trocar. I was fortunate to be able to attend the training session held by Dr. James Moore, the inventor of this technique during my visit. The second is laparoscopic sacrohysteropexy using a novel PVDF mesh for women of childbearing age who wished to preserve fertility. These techniques are added to my surgical armamentarium to give patients a wider range of surgical options in my future practice.

Academically, I am particularly grateful for Ms. Thakar and Mr. Sultan for going above and beyond to ensure that I had a good learning experience while I was visiting. They scheduled the observership to allow me to attend two amazing courses that they were teaching in the UK. Firstly, I attended the renowned OASIS hands on course that has been taught all over the world. After an interactive, multimedia-filled didactic session, I was able to practice perineal and OASIS repairs on animal models. This helped to solidify my knowledge on the prevention, diagnosis, and repair of OASIS on the labour ward. The home cooked meals prepared by Ms. Thakar was simply amazing! Secondly, I attended a course on Urodynamics held at the RCOG. This practical course allowed me to better troubleshoot and interpret urodynamic findings.

Finally, I would like to thank Ms. Thakar and Mr. Sultan for accepting my request to join them on this 4-week journey. Their passion for women's health is palpable and is demonstrated through their continual teaching of patients, trainees, and fellow colleagues. They inspire junior physicians to conduct research to provide better, evidence-based care to their patients. I am grateful to be able to call them my mentors and colleagues. In addition, I would like to thank IUGA for giving me this opportunity, my fellowship directors Drs. Cathy Flood and Jane Schulz for allowing me to take time away from my clinical duties, and the staff at the Orchid Suite for welcoming me into the family. The knowledge I have gained from this observership is invaluable and will certainly enhance my career as a urogynecologist in the future!

Yours sincerely,  
Charles Zhao



*Zainab, Dahlia, myself, and Michelle*



*Mr. Sultan, myself, and Ms. Thakar*