

ISPAD Allan Drash Fellowship Report

Recipient: Dr. Elena Vakali, MD, PhD(c), Endocrinology, Diabetes and Metabolism Fellow, “P. & A. Kyriakou” Children’s Hospital, Athens, Greece

Host Center: Pediatric Diabetes and Endocrinology Clinic at University of California San Francisco (UCSF), San Francisco, California, USA.

Mentor and Supervisor: Associate Professor Dr. Laya Ekhlaspour

Duration: 4 weeks (25/3/2024 – 19/4/2024)

Last year, I was privileged to be awarded with the Allan Drash Fellowship 2023 and get the opportunity to travel to the University of California San Francisco (UCSF), in San Francisco, California. The Pediatric Diabetes and Endocrinology Clinic of UCSF ranks among the top children’s hospitals in diabetes and endocrinology in the USA, according to U.S. News & World Report 2023-2024. Located near the university campus in San Francisco, the Madison Clinic is the place where the magic happens. The Diabetes Team consists of every specialty required by the guidelines and more: pediatric diabetes doctors, clinical dieticians, diabetes nurses, diabetes educators, social workers, researchers, psychologist and a diabetes transition program coordinator. During my fellowship I was able to attend patient visits, closely observe ongoing clinical research, get in touch with new diabetes technology gadgets and esteemed pediatric diabetes researchers’ work.

Having a solid background of diabetes management both as a patient and as an endocrinology and diabetes fellow in Greece, I was not so sure I could learn many new things during this experience; but UCSF proved me wrong. Every patient visit I attended, every research meeting, every presentation was full of teaching moments. Everything was meticulously planned; from the moment a child was diagnosed with diabetes to every follow-up visit thereafter. Nothing was left to chance and even the hardest cases were being handled using teamwork and expertise. The clinic was full of diverse and unique cases of diabetes, each of which added to my experience and diabetes care toolkit. Concerning diabetes technology, I realized how small my experience was, since the options I came across were the very ones I had only seen in diabetes forums. I had the opportunity to experience, hands-on, the latest developments, to see them in action and even get patient feedback on some of those I only knew in theory.

My supervisor and mentor, Dr. Laya Ekhlaspour, Pediatric Endocrinologist and Clinical Researcher is the person who showed me how clinical research and patient care are supposed to be approached. With up-to-date information always at hand, guideline-following practices and innovative research protocols she managed to open a whole new world for me and give me the opportunity to absorb more in 4 weeks than I would ever imagine possible. She also gave me the tools to work on my own project and with her guidance and expertise I was able to expand my own skills. I would not exaggerate by stating that she took me under her wings for the whole fellowship and made this whole experience fruitful and unique.

All the team members, doctors, fellows, nurses, consultants, dieticians, research associates made me feel most welcome and managed to make this experience one to remember. I have been in touch with technology not yet available in my country, I have seen how clinical research protocols

are supposed to be conducted and most importantly I have witnessed first-hand the results a multidisciplinary team can bring, especially in type 1 diabetes care. I am grateful for everything I was able to witness during this fellowship and I really hope I can integrate all those take-away messages in my own practice and help my diabetes center advance and provide even better care.

Thank you so much for everything!

Elena Vakali, MD, PhD(c)

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