

Crossing Borders and expanding Horizons: Dr. Carmen Saiz Guisasola's Journey in Radiation Oncology

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Could you briefly introduce yourself and tell us what initially drew you to pursue a career in radiation oncology?

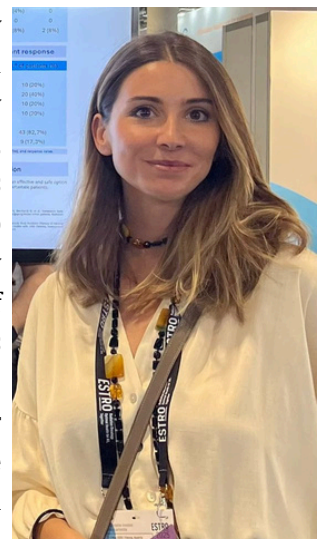
I am Carmen Saiz Guisasola, a specialist in radiation oncology, now doing a clinical fellowship in proton beam therapy at the UCLH in London. I did my training in Spain, Madrid, at a small but technically very advanced centre called Sanchinarro. When I finished my studies in medicine, I did not know that I would end up in this specialty, but I was really interested in oncology in general, as it is a really interesting field, always advancing at a really fast speed, with a lot of research and a really special relation with the patient. When the moment came to choose a specialty, my father, who is a neuroradiologist, told me to look radiation therapy up, as it had everything that I really loved and was a growing specialty with a lot of future, so I did, and I instantly fell in love with it.



During your residency, you completed an observership in Australia. What motivated you to choose Australia for this experience, and what did it contribute to your growth as a radiation oncologist?

First of all, I strongly believe that going abroad and getting to know other ways of working, how other departments work, a different job culture, and meeting new people, regardless of where you go, is always enriching.

My rotation in the Peter McCallum Cancer Centre in specific showed me a whole different way of working and living. The department was organized completely differently from mine in Spain. You could tell that in Australia they have so many resources, so they have amazing multidisciplinary teams with different specialists, that treat the patient from a really holistic, integrated point of view. Also, I could see that they are really committed to scientific research, and most of the doctors actively participated in studies, trials, research groups, etc. I could take part in some of them, go to research meetings, and get a grasp of how they work, the problems they encounter in their lab



work, etc., which I found inspiring. Moreover, moving abroad opens up your mind and your frontiers; you stop feeling like a Spanish doctor (in my case), and you realize you are a European doctor or just a global international one. And that should be our aim as young and early-career doctors, in my opinion.

You recently moved to London to continue your career. What motivated this decision, and what was the biggest challenge during the transition from Madrid to London?

Yes. I decided I wanted to keep learning and subspecialize a little bit more. I came to London to do a fellowship in proton beam therapy, which, as we know, is a growing branch of radiotherapy with more clinical indications every day due to the dosimetric benefit seen in different types of patients and anatomical locations.

Even though I am very happy and convinced that this experience is going to be very fulfilling and valuable for me, living abroad has its difficulties, or its cons. It always takes some time to adapt to a different culture and a different language. In the end, you are abandoning your family, friends, and the life you knew for a little while, so it's never easy. Getting here was not easy either, as I had to go through different processes and bureaucracy that were long and tedious. But with patience there is nothing impossible.

What does a typical workday look like for you now?

It depends on the day. My daily work hours range from 8am until 5pm or 10/11am until 7/8pm, depending on the shift that I am doing to



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cover the machine treatments.

There are different meetings, especially in the mornings, in which we try to organize the weekly job; we have pre-MDT meetings, peer review meetings, tumor boards of every tumor stream, imaging review meetings, etc. And depending on the day, I would have a clinic where I see either new patients that I need to consent and explain the treatment to on-treatment patients just to check and do a follow-up of the possible toxicities they could have throughout the treatment. And of course in the midst of all this I would have to contour in the spare time that I find (if I do), see the new patients, review dosimetries, write end-of-treatment letters, baseline flow sheets, etc. I think it is pretty much the same as in other countries.

Radiation oncology sits at the intersection of advanced technology and deeply personal patient care. What aspects of the specialty do you find most fulfilling?

As I previously mentioned in the first question, balance is what I love about this specialty. The relation between oncologist and oncologic patient is a very special one, and I find it to be really rewarding in general if you learn to cope with the sadness within. But there are patients that compensate others, as I always say, and overall it is amazing the job we do and how we get to know people really well, to grow a good relationship with them, learn about their lives, what they are afraid of, etc. While on the other hand, we are part of this amazing world that is cancer research, which is a never-ending field that combines so many specialties and technological and biological or molecular advances that you never get bored.



Have you ever doubted your abilities during your career? If so, how did you overcome those moments? What advice would you give to young colleagues who may be struggling with self-doubt?

Yes, of course, during the training there are always hard times and huge amounts of workloads. bad night shifts, not much sleep, and you just try to push through. There are moments where I made mistakes, and so I doubted myself and my abilities to do what I am doing. But I think that is impossible to avoid in every job in general. I think doubting yourself is the beginning for self-growth. It is the moment you reflect and reconsider next steps and decide if you need to change something about yourself or what you are doing to adapt to the environment or the needs that you are facing. So in the end it is just part of the process of growing, learning, and adapting. Without that suffering that comes from stress or feeling overwhelmed, it's just the consequence of being outside of your comfort zone. With patience and perseverance, you overcome it, I guess. The negative side is that it is a never-ending cycle in this career (laughs). I would say that to someone, and also to take things less seriously. You need to breathe, take it a step at a time, prioritize, think of the big picture, and enjoy it while at it. Enjoy the learning, the studying of the patients, etc. It is worth it.