Petra Rantanen

My goal in coming to London was to explore disability and palliative care, two of my main interests, by taking a comparative approach to the social and medical issues underlying each area in the US and the UK. My London experience far exceeded any goals I could have set. The opportunities I had this semester allowed me to grow personally and professionally, and to make connections with people throughout London and even the UK. I am still in happy disbelief over all of the amazing experiences I was fortunate enough to have.

 My internship at Hospice UK was one of the most valuable parts of my time in London. I was able to do everything from analyzing the Parliamentary debates on the Assisted Dying and Access to Palliative Care Bills to shadowing hospice physicians in two different hospices near London. One of the highlights was attending Hospice UK’s Annual Conference in Liverpool, where I heard a multitude of inspiring and thought-provoking speakers, and gained valuable insight on hospice care in the UK and how it differs from that of the United States. My reflections from the conference were even published on ehospice, an online news resource for those in the palliative care field! Through my internship at Hospice UK, I gained a wealth of knowledge on hospice care, the medical field in general, and good research practices.

 I was able to put these research practices to use at the Cicely Saunders Institute, part of King’s College. I volunteered at the Institute a few hours a week, reviewing papers and performing literature searches and reviews for current projects. Volunteering with the Institute gave me the opportunity to help with real-world research, and the skills I learned there will be invaluable as I embark on my own senior thesis in the coming months. I am also continuing to collaborate with the Institute, coauthoring a literature review paper on cognitive interviewing in palliative care populations.

 Besides exploring palliative care in London, I had hoped to delve into the topic of care of people with disabilities. I was able to do this through Drumbeat School, which caters to the needs of children on the autism spectrum. I visited Drumbeat once a week with twelve other Notre Dame students, to spend time with the students at Drumbeat and then attend a class on Developmental Disabilities. I learned about the different clinical aspects of autism, as well as the wide variety of resources available (and necessary) for raising a child on the autism spectrum. I loved spending time with the students in my classroom, and I found it incredibly rewarding to make connections with each student. I still think about the students in my class every day!

 Of course, London is an incredible cultural center, and I did not neglect that aspect of the city during my time there. Besides attending as many concerts and shows as I could, I joined an amateur orchestra to create some art myself. As a music-lover, I was concerned about how much time I would spend away from my cello during my time in London. The orchestra (and a rented cello) was a perfect antidote to my worries. Besides giving me an opportunity to play, orchestra gave me a chance to meet locals without the pretense of a professional setting. I was able to informally learn about London from the people who know it best—Londoners.

 I came to London with a somewhat narrow, albeit exciting, view of my career path: finishing college, taking a gap year before medical school, and then embarking on the journey of medical school, residency, and becoming a practicing physician in a large hospital. However, coming to London opened up so many new opportunities that I can envision my life going in all sorts of directions now. I am still planning on continuing my studies in palliative care and attending medical school, but my mind is buzzing with different ideas of the opportunities I have for my senior thesis and my gap year, and the variety of careers I could have with my medical degree.

 Spending a semester in London also helped me gain more independence and self-confidence. Although I am sure this has something to do with learning how to take the tube or bake bread for myself, I attribute it mostly to stepping out of my comfort zone. In London, I walked into orchestra rehearsals, conference dinners, and office buildings where I knew absolutely no one, and came out having made a few friends, or at least friendly conversation.

 Sitting at home in the United States, dreaming of Trafalgar Square and the South Bank, it is almost hard for me to believe all of the wonderful opportunities I experienced while I was in London. However, I know that the skills and confidence I gained, as well as the connections I made, will stay with me in the years to come. I consider myself so lucky to have spent a semester in London, and I am excited to see what is to come in my future explorations of palliative care and disability!