

# Pathogens Know No Borders, Neither Should We – Exchange Programs for Surveillance Professionals

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The value of medical exchange programs, such as fellowships and observerships, as tools for personal and professional development is widely recognized. These opportunities provide clinicians with the chance to acquire new skills, gain broader clinical experience, and establish international networks. The existing literature demonstrates that such programs enhance technical competencies, promote collaboration, and improve health outcomes in both host and sending countries (1,2). Although modern communication technologies facilitate the rapid dissemination of knowledge, experiential learning and immersive, hands-on experiences have been shown to yield more enduring and transformative outcomes (3).

However, these opportunities are largely confined to clinicians. Surveillance professionals, who play a central role in epidemic intelligence and preparedness, rarely have access to structured international exchange programs. This commentary is based on the visit of Taliha Karakök, manager of the Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance Unit at the General Directorate of Public Health in Türkiye, to the Center of Excellence for Health, Immunity and Infections (CHIP) as part of the European AIDS Clinical Society (EACS) Career Development Fellowship Programme. The Career Development Fellowship aims to provide a link between an HIV physician in training and an established European key opinion leader over a period of 12 months to facilitate mentorship and support career progression. The fellowship program is based on specific objectives jointly defined by the mentor and the fellow and may include launching a new research project, developing or preparing an existing project for presentation or publication, acquiring new clinical skills or areas of interest, and developing or improving a clinical service based on an audit or service review.

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While national surveillance systems reflect country-specific realities, their outputs must be standardized to ensure meaningful integration into international platforms for global strategic planning and monitoring. The coronavirus disease-19 (COVID-19) pandemic further exposed disparities in surveillance capacity, data reporting, and public health interventions, demonstrating that systems cannot be shaped solely by local needs. Instead, alignment with internationally agreed definitions, indicators, and priorities is essential for timely and coordinated responses to health threats. This visit provided valuable insights into both barriers and opportunities for integrating surveillance systems at the national level, contributing not only to the fellow's professional development but also to the strengthening of the national surveillance system.

Moreover, the visit highlighted the critical importance of harmonizing human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) care standards through robust monitoring and evaluation processes, which are indispensable for improving both patient outcomes and system performance. Through its focus on HIV and sexually transmitted infection surveillance, the fellowship also facilitated updates to the country's Dublin Declaration reporting, informed discussions on modeling national HIV cases against the 95-95-95 targets and enabled the examination of international best practices to identify areas for improvement and adaptation within the national surveillance system. In the field of standards-of-care audits, the visit created an opportunity to assess the role of national specificities in shaping adherence to international standards, reinforcing the view that such audits should be developed from a comprehensive and inclusive global perspective.

Strengthening communication between public health experts and clinicians emerged as another key factor in ensuring data completeness and the effective translation of evidence into practice. This experience further underscored the value of international collaboration in fostering

knowledge exchange and enhancing data quality and comparability.

The establishment of structured exchange programs for surveillance professionals represents a critical step forward. Such programs should enable officers to:

- Gain exposure to international reference institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO), European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC),
- Observe innovative country-level approaches to monitoring, evaluation, and digital case-based surveillance,
- Address shared challenges such as incomplete reporting, data confidentiality, and stigma through peer learning,
- Improve harmonization and data quality at the regional and global levels.

These initiatives would not only strengthen technical skills but also foster solidarity and shared accountability. At a time of reduced donor funding for the global HIV response and increasing competing priorities, such cross-border exchanges could help redistribute expertise, share the workload of reference institutions, and evolve into "twinning" models where officers collaborate as sister institutions. This would, in turn, help relieve the burden on leading global health authorities such as the WHO, promote more balanced surveillance capacities across countries, and generate synergistic effects toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

This visit has therefore been highly valuable for the professional development of the fellow, offering unique insights that will shape future contributions to HIV surveillance and public health. We extend our sincere gratitude to EACS for making this program possible.

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