

Taking an Orthopaedic Sabbatical: *Mon Année en Lyon*

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From June 2015 until May 2016, I undertook an orthopaedic sabbatical in Lyon, France. It was one of the most fulfilling experiences of my professional career. Although sabbatical leave is frequently used by faculty on main campus, sabbaticals are not commonly undertaken by medical-school faculty and are even rarer amongst orthopaedic surgeons. In my 26 years at The University of New Mexico (UNM), I know of only two orthopaedic faculty members who undertook sabbaticals: Moheb Moneim and Thomas DeCoster.

The concept of a sabbatical originated in biblical times.^{1,2} The early Israelites recognized that trying to get their fields to yield year after year would deplete the land of resources, and their production would decrease. In the late 1800s, leaders at American universities understood the value of having faculty take periodic leave. The first definite system of sabbatical leave was established in 1880 at Harvard University. By 1920, a total of 50 universities had sabbatical leave plans in place; today, most American universities have some form of sabbatical available for faculty.³ Carter Good's *Dictionary of Education*⁴ defines a sabbatical as "a plan for providing teachers with an opportunity for self-improvement through a leave of absence with full or partial compensation following a designated number of years of consecutive service." The critical elements of a sabbatical are as follows: a defined purpose or goal, compensation during the leave, and a definite period of prior service in the institution (typically 6 years). At UNM, sabbatical leave is available to all tenured faculty members with approval from the department chairperson and dean.⁵

For my sabbatical, I spent 1 year in Lyon, France, working with Professor Philippe Neyret at L'Hôpital de la Croix Rousse (Figure 1). Professor Neyret was schooled in the Lyon School of Knee Surgery and is recognized worldwide as an expert in knee surgery (Figure 2). He is the chief of the Centre Albert Trillat where his faculty includes Professors Elvire Servien and Sébastien Lustig. I desired to learn novel advanced knee surgical techniques and participate in research projects related to knee pathology and treatment.



Figure 1. L'Hôpital de la Croix Rousse, Lyon, France, where the Centre Albert Trillat is located.



Figure 2. Professor Philippe Neyret and I attending the meeting of the European Society of Sports Traumatology, Knee Surgery and Arthroscopy in Barcelona, Spain.

There are many advantages to the faculty member undertaking a sabbatical. These benefits have been reviewed by Sima.⁶ For me, the sabbatical was intellectually and personally stimulating. The French surgeons I worked with had different ideas on the diagnosis and treatment of knee conditions. These physicians challenged my long-standing opinions and showed me new techniques that I have adopted in my current practice. I am performing more osteotomies for treating arthritis and extra-articular reconstructions for revision procedures in treating anterior

cruciate ligament injuries; I recently performed my first trochleoplasty.

During my sabbatical, I also participated in many research projects. To date, this collaboration has resulted in seven publications. The personal connections I made were even more important. I became great friends with Professor Neyret during our frequent discussions over morning *café* or afternoon *déjeuner*. I also developed relationships with the rest of the Croix-Rousse faculty. I visited Nicolas Gravelau and Philippe Colombet in Bordeaux and chatted with Professor Pedro Guillen in Madrid (Figure 3). During a visit to Budapest, a former UNM sports-medicine fellow, Tamas Bardos, provided us with a wonderful tour.



Figure 3. Nicolas Gravelau and I in the operating theater in Mérignac, near Bordeaux.

Personally, the sabbatical year allowed time for relaxation and reflection that is often lacking in our busy life as an academic orthopaedic surgeon. We spent the weekends exploring the many regions of France and enjoyed amazing sights, food, and wine (Figure 4). I had time to think about what the priorities should be in my work and family life. The French physicians worked hard but truly knew how to enjoy many things that we ignore, including a leisurely stroll along the Rhone or lingering over a *digestif* after a meal. Sabbaticals are great at preventing physician “burn-out.”



Figure 4. Professor Neyret, waiter, Carlotta Emslie, Isabelle Neyret, and I enjoying dinner at Brasserie Georges in Lyon, France.

As rewarding as the sabbatical year was, it is important to remember that sabbaticals were “established not in the interests of the professors themselves, but for the good of university education”³ Zahorski outlined the advantages of having a sabbatical program to the institution.⁶ Certainly, I believe that my sabbatical will have great benefits to UNM Orthopaedics. The quality of UNM Orthopaedics is now known in Europe. Professor Neyret committed to visiting Albuquerque to give a series of lectures in the next year. Several residents have already expressed interest in spending their fourth-year elective in Lyon, and they will be warmly welcomed. I also hope to expand the research collaboration between Lyon and Albuquerque. Most important, the knowledge and skills I learned in Lyon are now being taught to the residents and fellows in Albuquerque.

When I discuss the fantastic experience of my sabbatical with other orthopaedic surgeons, they often counter with reasons why they would not undertake a sabbatical. The four main reasons given are: 1) the financial cost; 2) the loss of surgical skills; 3) the negative impact on their practice; and 4) the disruption to family life. I would argue that the benefits of a sabbatical far outweigh any negatives. Sabbaticals should not be limited just to academic orthopaedic surgeons. With proper planning, even a private-practice orthopaedist can afford to take a sabbatical. One study reported that, of 70 medical-school faculty members who undertook a sabbatical, a total of 80% rated the experience as equal to or greater than eight points (of 10 points).⁷ A total of 75% reported that the sabbatical resulted in substantial academic achievement. Personally, I would rate my sabbatical a “perfect 10.”

For those contemplating taking a sabbatical, I have several suggestions for making it a resounding success. First, planning a sabbatical is key. It is critically important to find a person or an institution that will be intellectually challenging, allow for professional collaboration, and most importantly, that will be welcoming. Professor Neyret and the faculty at the Centre Albert Trillat were gracious hosts who freely shared their knowledge and welcomed my input on clinical situations and research projects. It is also never too early to start arrangements for licensure, housing, and transportation. My second piece of advice to step out of your “comfort zone.” Do not be intimidated by a foreign country, language difficulties, or different ways of approaching orthopaedic problems. Embrace the challenges, and you will grow both professionally and personally. Finally, I would suggest that a 6-month sabbatical is too short a time, particularly if one is going to spend it in another country. It took 4 months to get used to living in France and about that long for the surgeons in Lyon to trust my opinions and surgical skills. The second

6 months were much more enjoyable and productive than the first 6 months. All in all, the year passed much too quickly.

In summary, a sabbatical is one of the great benefits of an academic orthopaedic career, but one that too many surgeons fail to pursue. Time away from one's home institution reduces "burn out," challenges established beliefs, and results in numerous opportunities for professional growth. I would highly recommend that all orthopaedic surgeons—in both academics and private practice—explore taking a sabbatical during their career. If your sabbatical is half as good as mine, it will be an amazing experience (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Carlotta and I visiting Paris, France.

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