It would seem people who work in Australian healthcare tend to welcome a challenge. When discussing their reasons behind participating in the RACGP Foundation’s latest fundraising journey along Spain’s El Camino de Santiago, which took place 2–13 May, a common theme quickly emerged.

‘I wanted to give myself a challenge in life,’ Louise McKenzie, an RACGP support and training administrator who undertook the walk, told Good Practice. ‘The El Camino was something that was way out of my comfort zone to do on my own and I thought, why not challenge myself?’

Queensland GP Dr Lisa Oliver was initially inspired by the challenge undertaken during the most recent RACGP Foundation event in Papua New Guinea in 2013.

‘I had been thinking about participating in this event after I read about the Kokoda Trail challenge. The El Camino seemed to be the perfect opportunity to challenge myself physically and to travel abroad and meet like-minded people, all while helping raise funds for the medical community,’ she told Good Practice.

New South Wales GP Dr Marney Wilson was inspired by friends as well as the difficult nature of the El Camino.

‘I really liked the challenge of such a long-distance walk,’ she told Good Practice. ‘I also had friends who had done the El Camino trek in the past. They came back full of joy and got a lot of personal satisfaction from doing it. I was hoping to achieve some of that for myself.’

For Drs Libby and Ross Hindmarsh, the oldest participants at age 71, the trek was first and foremost a physical test they wanted to tackle – ‘We thought it would be a challenge to get ourselves fitter’ – but it also represented another, more personal opportunity to travel along the El Camino pilgrimage route to the shrine of St James the Great.
‘You hear people talk about pilgrims walking to Santiago de Compostela, where the St James shrine is, and we attend St James King Street Anglican church in Sydney,’ Ross Hindmarsh told Good Practice. ‘It’s a pilgrim’s walk and we have never done that.’

The trekkers travelled more than 100 km along the centuries-old El Camino, starting in Sarria in northern Spain and walking through beautiful countryside before arriving in the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Santiago de Compostela.

‘When you get to the Cathedral in Santiago de Compostela it’s very impressive just being there will all of these people, the hundreds of people who have just completed the walk,’ Ross Hindmarsh said. ‘It was exhilarating.’

A worthy cause

As with 2013’s Conquer Kokoda for a Cause, the trek along the El Camino de Santiago was aimed at raising much needed funds and awareness for general practice research. This year’s event raised $24,000.

‘The RACGP Foundation is one of a few charities in Australia that fundraises and supports general practice research and we were honoured to have RACGP members participate in this worthy event,’ Melissa Milne, RACGP Foundation Program Coordinator, told Good Practice.

‘The El Camino trek in Spain provided us with the perfect backdrop to engage with our members to raise funds in the name of charity. I couldn’t think of a better way to spend time than trekking along the El Camino in support of a great cause.’

The El Camino participants – Dr Marney Wilson (NSW), Dr Lisa Oliver (Qld), John Oliver (Qld), Dr Larry Yee (NSW), Louise McKenzie (Vic) and Drs Libby and Ross Hindmarsh (NSW) – were aware of the importance of the RACGP Foundation and general practice research when they signed up for the challenge. ☛
‘General practice is at the frontline of healthcare in Australia and GP-led research ensures our community benefits from evidence-based practices, improving the quality of the primary healthcare we deliver,’ Oliver said.

While it still represented a significant challenge, the RACGP Foundation’s El Camino adventure was definitely somewhat less rugged than 2013’s Conquer Kokoda for a Cause.

‘This time we wanted to offer our members an adventure that appealed to all age groups and fitness levels,’ Milne said.

According to Libby Hindmarsh, the less-rugged features of the El Camino did prove welcome.

‘We stayed in small hotels each night. They were clean and very nice, and we had an organised meal at night and breakfast in the morning. It was very civilised,’ she said.

‘That was one of the reasons Ross and I thought we would go this time – we thought we could manage this trek.’

Spanish healthcare

Before setting off on the El Camino, the RACGP group spent two days in the Spanish capital of Madrid. While they were able to take in some of the sights, the group also visited the Spanish Society of Family and Community Medicine (SemFYC) for a presentation on the local healthcare system, which proved an eye-opening experience.

‘That was a highlight,’ Ross Hindmarsh said. ‘Their organisation has very similar ethics to the RACGP, trying to provide holistic general practice and give people equity and access to care.’

Wilson appreciated not only the opportunity to learn about the Spanish healthcare system, but also the lengths the SemFYC staff members went to in order to make the event as informative as possible.

‘I was very impressed with the presentation they put together. They had a lot of statistics about health in Spain and had comparative figures for various countries. They put the effort in to ensure that Australia was one of the countries so we could see how the two nations compared,’ she said.
‘Then we got to go to a local health facility, which was very similar, and also quite different, from general practice in Australia.’

The extra effort of the SemFYC’s staff members even extended beyond the presentations and into the evening in Madrid. ‘They did the whole presentation tailored to Australia and it was just great. It was only supposed to go for a couple of hours, but they organised a dinner for that night. They also brought more GPs to the dinner that night,’ McKenzie said. ‘They didn’t have to do that, but they were so lovely.

‘Working in the area of healthcare in Australia, it was a real highlight to see how they work in Spain.’

GPs lead the way

Once on the El Camino, the trekkers’ typical day would start at around 6.30–7.00 am, beginning with a light breakfast and a debrief from their local guide, David, about what they had in store for that day. There would be a morning tea after about two hours of walking, followed by lunch and afternoon tea before arriving at their destination at around 5.00 pm. The group walked an average of 22–24 km each day.

‘That was a real highlight at the end of every day, reaching our destination and feeling that we had walked another day,’ Wilson said.

The disparate nature of the RACGP group – differing ages and home cities – made for some very stimulating healthcare-related conversations along the way. It also meant different walking speeds, but everyone made sure to not stray too far apart.

‘Everyone was very considerate of everyone else. Some of us were fast walkers and some were slower,’ Wilson said.

‘Over the course of the day the group could get quite separated – there could be over 30 minutes between the first and the last. But several times over the day the faster ones would stop and give the slower ones a chance to catch up so they didn’t feel isolated at the back.’

While everyone loved the beautiful countryside, wildlife and architecture along the walk, it was not without its hurdles. Oliver, in particular, learnt the value of travelling with a group of fellow healthcare professionals.

‘An unfortunate time for me came when I took my fitness for granted and pushed my knees too hard,’ she said. ‘The dancing I did [in Madrid] caught up to me and I was left with a swollen and painful knee at the end of day three of the trek. I was faced with the decision as to whether I should continue.

‘However, as my fellow group members kindly offered medical advice, analgesia and regular reviews, and a set of trekking poles, I was able to push through.

‘Thank you, Marney, Ross, Libby and Larry [Yee].’

When the trekkers finally walked into Santiago de Compostela, they were struck with a real feeling of achievement that they had all overcome the challenges of the El Camino and achieved something special together.

‘There was a great sense of camaraderie with completing this challenge as a group, and I certainly appreciated that when everyone helped me to complete it,’ Oliver said.


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