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Radiology trainees top in prestigious US competition Malta has won every year bar one since 2013



Dr Adrian Mizzi. Photos: Mark Zammit Cordina

A group of Maltese radiology trainees have won a renowned competition in which they have to come up with the right diagnosis on a monthly basis for a whole year.

These trainees are aspiring to join the group of radiologists at Mater Dei Hospital who do diagnosis as well as perform life-saving interventions such as the removal of blood clots in the least invasive manner and under local anaesthetic.

This is the third year that the Mater Dei team has placed first within the international resident group category in the challenge set by the medical journal Radiology, which is published by the Radiological Society of North America.

The news that they topped the 2016 competition comes just as the world celebrated International Day of Radiology last Wednesday.

According to the journal, this year's 'Diagnosis Please' competition was "hotly contested".

In Malta, the trainees study and research every case and submit their individual diagnoses to Adrian Mizzi, the post-graduate training coordinator. They then all meet and discuss the best diagnosis, which they submit to the journal.

Malta has been participating since 2013, and has placed first as the international resident group every year apart from 2015, when they were beaten by Thailand.

This year the team seems to be doing well, according to Dr Mizzi, but the 2017 results will not be out until next year.

This monthly challenge – which mirrors real life situations – is an additional task for the trainees, who spend five years specialising in radiology after the mandatory five years medical undergraduate course and two years foundation training.

This helps avoid a brain drain which Malta experienced for years

Radiology is an ever-evolving medical speciality which started off with medical imaging including X-Ray, CT Scans and MRIs, but has moved on to minimally invasive interventions, which include procuring tumour biopsies for cancer diagnosis.

And while in the past a patient admitted to hospital after suffering a stroke would have been treated with medicine, when possible radiologists nowadays access the blood clot with a catheter and remove it from the arteries. Not all patients are eligible for this treatment.

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The Malta Radiology Resident Team.

The radiologists work very closely with other specialists, including when it comes to revascularisation of the leg (increasing blood circulation) in diabetes patients.

While passing a bypass through surgical intervention is one solution, radiologists could also introduce a stent, which helps keep peripheral arteries open.

Known as percutaneous transluminal angioplasty, this intervention is often carried out on patients who are at risk of developing ulcers and even losing parts of their legs.

Similar interventions under local anaesthetic are carried out in the liver and the brain, among others.

Flanked by third year trainee Christine Cannataci, Dr Mizzi explained that when the health services moved from St Luke's to Mater Dei Hospital, speciality training in different sectors started being carried out in Malta.

Dr Mizzi had specialised in Scotland, but his trainees need only go abroad to sit for Royal College of Radiologists exams and for one year at the end of their five-year training programme.

So far there have been 12 accredited radiology specialists, and while three are still receiving training abroad, the remaining nine have returned to Malta.

"This helps avoid a brain drain which Malta experienced for years. Unless we continue producing local specialists, we might need to bring over specialists from abroad, because treatment demands are on the increase," he noted.

The local group includes Dr Richard Pullicino, Dr Christine Azzopardi, Dr Mark Schembri, Dr Sarah Degiorgio, Dr Cannataci, Dr Gabriel Galea, Dr Lara Sammut, Dr Veronica Attard, Dr Nathania Bonanno, Dr Veronica Aquilina, Dr Nathan Edwards, Dr Lara Zammit, Dr Simon Gatt and Dr Esther Otukoya, while the trainers are Dr Mizzi, Dr Reuben Grech and Dr Andre Stefan Gatt.