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Radiology Management in Austria: Profile of the AKH Imaging Department

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The history of the Vienna General Hospital goes back more than three hundred years. It came about as the result of the reconstruction of the "Home for the Poor and Invalid", which was founded by Emperor Leopold I in 1693 and was located from 1694 on the site between Alserstrasse, Spitalgasse and Garnisongasse. The home was partly opened in 1695, and in 1696 it housed more than 1,000 poor people. The Vienna General Hospital was officially opened on 7 June, 1994. This is commemorated by a roll of honour at the entrance to the hospital with the names of the decision makers: Franz Vranitzky, Erhard Busek, Helmut Zilk, Ferdinand Lacina, Hans Mayr and Sepp Rieder.

Vienna University Hospital (AKH) has now developed into one of the largest hospitals in Austria. It is a university hospital with 2,189 beds. There are two imaging departments - radiology and nuclear medicine. We perform about 10,600 diagnostic procedures per annum. We provide a thyroid outpatient clinic, a treatment ward and a nuclear medicine imaging centre, including PET. Ours is a public institution. Reimbursement is provided for by both the city of Vienna and the federal budget.

Education in Radiology

In Austria, the residency course for radiology takes six years to complete, of which 5 years are spent training in radiology, 1 year of which can then be spent in either the nuclear medicine or radio-oncology departments. The 6th year must be split into 6 months between internal medicine, 3 months of which in surgery and 3 months where residents are free to choose from other specialties. At the end of the training there is a board examination.

In my own case, after finishing medical school 1993, I began my residency in internal medicine at the University Hospital of Vienna. After training in internal medicine I started specialisation in nuclear medicine, finishing in 2002. Since 2003, I am an attending physician at the department of nuclear medicine.

In my function as assistant medical director I have been organising the thyroid outpatients clinic from 2003 to 2004, then the treatment ward until 2006. Since 2007, I am organising and working in the diagnostic imaging centre. My areas of interest are paediatric nuclear medicine and the evaluation and optimisation of processes as well as standardisation and SPECT-CT. I do a lot in radiation safety and clinical investigations, as well as basic science in medical physics.

Our imaging department offer patients conventional NM, SPECT-CT, PET and in the near future PET-CT (as well as PET-MRI, albeit for science and not as a matter of routine). We are also involved in thyroid management and therapy.

Management Challenges

In our department, there are waiting lists in the thyroid outpatient clinic and partly in the PET facility where these waiting lists sometimes pose a significant problem. In the diagnostic imaging part of our department, which I am responsible for, our scheduling centre has been set up to provide ways to avoid the formation of significant waiting lists.

We are proactive in avoiding turf battles and other conflicts in the nuclear medicine department by encouraging open communication as often as possible with the referring physicians. We also try to optimise and adapt our services to the demand of the clinicians and to anticipate their needs. This sort of approach ensures that problems are less likely to develop. If you know what they want and they know what you are able to deliver then it should work without major conflicts.

In terms of career development, the higher you rise in the hierarchy, the more you have to do troubleshooting and management tasks. If you want to be good at your job, you have to take classes in management. While common sense might help you, in a today's world it is more important to learn the tricks from experts who are specifically trained in economics.

While I definitely enjoy the management part of my job, the problem is that I have to manage without optimal financial resources and the obligation to report to the head of the department can present obstacles, and while I am committed to the scientific part of my job, I can only fulfil all these functions by eating into my spare time.

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