



EUSTAR Fellowship Summary Report



Fellow: Rahma Elziaty

Host Institution: EUSTAR Center (220), San Raffaele Hospital, Milan

Dates of Fellowship: 1/9/2025 to 22/9/2025

Supervisor: Prof. Marco Matucci-Cerinic

1. What were the key objectives of your EUSTAR Fellowship, and to what extent were they achieved during your placement?

My main objectives were to enhance my clinical expertise in systemic autoimmune diseases, particularly systemic sclerosis and connective tissue diseases; observe advanced diagnostic approaches, and gain experience in multidisciplinary management. These goals were fully achieved through exposure to diverse cases, interactive discussions, and mentorship under Professor Matucci, which strengthened my diagnostic and analytical skills.

2. How has the Fellowship contributed to your professional development and future career plans in systemic sclerosis research or clinical practice?

The fellowship enriched my clinical reasoning, improved my diagnostic accuracy, and deepened my understanding of systemic sclerosis and related disorders. It expanded my professional network through collaboration with leading experts and inspired future research ideas, particularly in multidisciplinary management and imaging applications in systemic autoimmune diseases.

3. What were the most valuable aspects of your hosting institution's environment (e.g., supervision, facilities, team integration)?

The three-week experience at San Raffaele Hospital offered exceptional mentorship and access to advanced facilities. Professor Matucci and the team members whom I was in contact with provided continuous guidance and encouraged active participation, creating a Page 2 | 2 supportive and cooperative environment that greatly enhanced my clinical learning, professional growth, and overall fellowship experience.

4. What suggestions do you have for improving the EUSTAR Fellowship scheme for future participants?

The fellowship was excellently organized and highly rewarding. Although the full program offers three months, my stay was limited to three weeks. I advise future fellows to benefit from the full duration. It is also essential to ensure dedicated support for incoming fellows; I was fortunate to have Dr. Veronica Batani's invaluable help.

REPORT

I had the great privilege of undertaking a three-week EUSTAR Clinical Fellowship at the Rheumatology Unit of San Raffaele Hospital in Milan, Italy. This fellowship was a remarkable opportunity to be immersed in one of the leading European centers for systemic autoimmune and connective tissue diseases. From the very first day, it was evident that this program was designed not only to provide clinical exposure but also to encourage critical thinking, scientific curiosity, and multidisciplinary collaboration. Over the course of three intensive weeks, I attended a wide range of outpatient visits, interacted closely with outstanding clinicians and researchers, and deepened my understanding of both the science and the art of rheumatology.

During my stay, I attended and actively participated in approximately 120 clinical visits distributed across different specialized rheumatology clinics. The diversity of cases I encountered was extraordinary, covering almost the entire spectrum of systemic autoimmune disorders. I observed and discussed patients with systemic sclerosis, idiopathic inflammatory myopathies, autoimmune myocarditis, systemic lupus erythematosus, large-vessel and small-vessel vasculitis, Sjögren's syndrome, autoinflammatory diseases, immune-related adverse events due to checkpoint inhibitors, and various forms of inflammatory arthritis, each in its respective specialized clinic. The opportunity to follow such a wide variety of pathologies in such a short period was an exceptional learning experience. Each clinic provided a distinct perspective on disease mechanisms, diagnostic reasoning, and personalized treatment strategies. Importantly, I was not merely a passive observer; I was encouraged to actively engage, propose differential diagnoses, discuss management approaches, and share experiences from my own clinical background. This interactive and collegial atmosphere enhanced my confidence and strengthened my diagnostic and clinical reasoning skills.

One of the most inspiring aspects of the fellowship was attending the outpatient clinics of Professor Marco Matucci. Observing his patient-centered approach, precision, empathy, and deep clinical insight was an invaluable learning experience. His ability to integrate clinical findings, laboratory results, and imaging data into a cohesive diagnostic and therapeutic plan reflected a level of mastery achieved only through long-standing dedication and expertise. I was particularly impressed by his communication style—he always took the time to ensure each patient clearly understood their condition and treatment plan, demonstrating both compassion and professionalism. In addition to outpatient sessions, I had the privilege of accompanying Professor Matucci on inpatient consultations across the hospital departments. These hospital rounds were particularly enlightening, as they underscored the systemic nature of rheumatologic diseases and the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration. They also highlighted the central role of rheumatologists in coordinating care for patients with complex multisystem involvement. These experiences reinforced my appreciation for the holistic nature of patient care and the significance of teamwork in achieving optimal outcomes.

I also had the opportunity to attend the Musculoskeletal Ultrasound (MSUS) clinic, where I observed how ultrasound is integrated into routine rheumatologic evaluation. The clinic provided valuable exposure to the practical aspects of using ultrasound in diagnosis and disease monitoring. Although my exposure was brief, it offered a concise overview of how imaging supports decision-making and enhances the accuracy of clinical evaluation.

Equally enriching were the multidisciplinary team (MDT) meetings that I attended during the fellowship. I had the privilege of participating in three different MDT discussions—one with nephrology, one with otolaryngology (ENT), and one with neurology. Each meeting brought together experts from diverse specialties to discuss challenging and complex cases requiring collaborative management.

During the nephrology MDT, we discussed several fascinating cases, including lupus nephritis, IgG4-related disease, and Still's disease with renal involvement. The discussions focused on the interpretation of renal biopsy findings, treatment optimization, and long-term follow-up strategies for these complex cases. The ENT meeting centered on vasculitic involvement of the upper airways, while the neurology MDT explored cases of neuropsychiatric lupus and antiphospholipid syndrome with cerebrovascular complications. These multidisciplinary sessions demonstrated the immense value of shared expertise and collective decision-making in managing patients with multisystem diseases. They also emphasized the importance of communication between specialties, which is vital for ensuring comprehensive and patient-centered care.

From an educational standpoint, the fellowship was exceptionally rich and fulfilling. It allowed me to refine my clinical examination skills, improve my ability to recognize subtle systemic features, and deepen my understanding of the pathophysiology of various autoimmune diseases. I also gained updated knowledge about European treatment guidelines and practical insights into the use of biologics, immunomodulators, and emerging therapeutic options. Observing how the San Raffaele team integrated research evidence into clinical decisions encouraged me to maintain a continuous connection between patient care and scientific investigation. Furthermore, I gained a better understanding of the organization and workflow within a tertiary referral center—how structured documentation, multidisciplinary discussions, and evidence-based protocols contribute to consistent, high-quality care.

Beyond academic learning, this fellowship also offered invaluable personal and cultural experiences. Working within a dynamic and diverse team, engaging with patients from different backgrounds, and being part of an institution that values curiosity, empathy, and collaboration reminded me of the universal nature of medicine. The entire rheumatology team at San Raffaele was welcoming and collegial. Every member was approachable, willing to share knowledge, and eager to create a supportive environment for fellows. I was particularly touched by the warmth and professionalism of Dr. Veronica Batani, Dr. Giulia Buonsante, and Dr. Biancamaria Venerandi, whose positivity and helpfulness made every day enjoyable and productive. They were always ready to explain details, provide guidance on clinical protocols, and ensure I was involved in all educational opportunities. Their encouragement and continuous support truly enhanced my experience.

I am especially grateful to Dr. Veronica Batani for her exceptional assistance even before my arrival in Milan. She kindly helped me prepare the necessary documents while I was still in Egypt and went beyond expectations to help me find suitable accommodation near the hospital. Throughout the fellowship, she regularly checked on my progress and comfort, ensuring I was fully integrated into the team. Thanks to her, I felt completely at home during my stay in Milan, as though I were among family. Her kindness, attention to detail, and genuine care made a profound difference in my experience, for which I am deeply thankful.

I owe special gratitude to Professor Marco Matucci for granting me this invaluable opportunity and for his generosity in sharing his time, expertise, and mentorship. His dedication to clinical excellence and education was

truly inspiring, and I feel privileged to have learned directly from him. I would also like to extend my sincere appreciation to EUSTAR for offering this fellowship and for their continuous efforts to promote collaboration, education, and research among rheumatologists worldwide. Finally, I am deeply thankful to Professor El-Miedany for his constant mentorship, support, and encouragement throughout my professional journey and for motivating me to apply for this unique program.

In conclusion, my EUSTAR Clinical Fellowship at the Rheumatology Unit of San Raffaele Hospital was an unforgettable and transformative experience that has significantly contributed to both my professional development and personal growth. It provided me with outstanding exposure to a wide range of autoimmune and connective tissue diseases, enhanced my clinical reasoning and diagnostic skills, and deepened my appreciation for multidisciplinary and patient-centered care. This experience strengthened my motivation to pursue further clinical and academic work in systemic autoimmune diseases and to contribute to improving rheumatology care in my own country. The lessons I learned in Milan—from both the scientific and human perspectives—will remain with me throughout my career. I return home enriched, inspired, and immensely grateful for the opportunity to have been part of such an exceptional center of excellence. I look forward to maintaining the professional connections I established, applying the knowledge I gained, and sharing my experiences with colleagues and trainees to further advance rheumatology practice.