



EUSTAR Fellowship Summary Report



Fellow: Valeria Rella

Host Institution: Leeds Institute of Rheumatic and Musculoskeletal Medicine (LIRMM), Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust – Scleroderma Unit, United Kingdom

Home Institution: Rheumatology Unit, Medicine and Surgery Department, Università degli Studi di Foggia, Foggia, Italy

Dates of Fellowship: 23-June-2025 – 19-December 2025

Supervisor: Professor Francesco Del Galdo

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

During my EUSTAR Fellowship, I worked directly with a systemic sclerosis patient cohort in a leading center, gaining expertise in statistical data analysis and database management. These objectives were fully achieved, strengthening my research skills and understanding of cohort studies

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

The Fellowship enhanced my expertise in systemic sclerosis, combining research skills in cohort management and data analysis with clinical insights. It expanded my international network, fostered collaborations with leading centers, and strengthened my career plans to advance translational research and improve patient care in systemic sclerosis

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

The hosting institution provided excellent supervision, state-of-the-art facilities, and seamless integration into a multidisciplinary team. Regular mentorship, collaborative discussions, and access to a well-curated patient cohort greatly supported my learning, allowing me to develop research and clinical skills in systemic sclerosis in a highly supportive and stimulating environment

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

The Fellowship was well-organized, with clear application and reporting processes, sufficient funding, and excellent support from the host center.

REPORT

My name is Valeria Rella, a rheumatology specialist and PhD student at the Università degli Studi di Foggia, Italy. I had the privilege of completing my EUSTAR Fellowship at the Scleroderma Unit of the Leeds Institute of Rheumatic & Musculoskeletal Medicine (LIRMM), one of Europe's leading centers for systemic sclerosis, under the supervision of Prof. Francesco Del Galdo.

This fellowship was exceptionally valuable both professionally and scientifically, greatly expanding my understanding of systemic sclerosis and its lung involvement. From the outset, I was fully integrated into a multidisciplinary setting where patient care follows structured, protocol-driven pathways. The close combination of clinical practice and research was particularly striking and offered a perspective beyond the more conventional models I was familiar with. I had the opportunity to observe how lung manifestations are systematically evaluated and how longitudinal clinical data are actively applied to guide personalized management strategies.

Building on this environment, the main focus of my project was on patients with systemic sclerosis-associated interstitial lung disease (SSc-ILD). During my fellowship, I worked with a bicentric cohort of 74 well-characterized patients to explore the potential clinical relevance of mediastinal lymphadenopathy as a marker of disease activity and progression.

I was actively involved in processing clinical and imaging data, integrating organ involvement, pulmonary function, and serological information to identify patterns associated with ILD progression. Preliminary findings showed that approximately 38% of patients had at least one enlarged mediastinal lymph node, and these patients tended to exhibit a higher risk of ILD progression. These results were accepted as a poster at an international systemic sclerosis congress in November 2025 and were further refined and expanded throughout my fellowship. This experience allowed me to develop advanced skills in database management, statistical analysis, and longitudinal data interpretation, while working closely with a multidisciplinary team of clinicians and researchers. Being immersed in such a collaborative environment greatly enhanced my understanding of translational research approaches in systemic sclerosis and reinforced the link between research and patient care.

This fellowship significantly contributed to my professional development and future career plans in systemic sclerosis research and clinical practice. It allowed me to acquire advanced competencies in handling complex multicenter datasets, statistical analysis, and longitudinal patient follow-up. Working closely with the Leeds multidisciplinary team enhanced my collaborative and translational research skills, and fostered connections with international experts in the field. Building on this experience, I plan to continue collaborating remotely with the Leeds group on data interpretation and manuscript preparation. Moreover, I aim to implement similar structured research protocols and early screening approaches in my home institution, further bridging clinical care and research for patients with systemic sclerosis.

In summary, this EUSTAR Fellowship has been a major step in my clinical and scientific development. It enabled me to gain hands-on experience with a high-quality patient cohort, strengthen my analytical and research skills, and understand the integration of clinical care with translational research. I am extremely

grateful to EUSTAR for this unique opportunity, to Prof. Francesco Del Galdo and the Leeds team for their scientific guidance and warm welcome, and to my home supervisor at the Università degli Studi di Foggia for continuous support. I highly recommend this program to early-career clinicians and researchers interested in pursuing a career in systemic sclerosis research and patient care.