



## A USEFUL WASTE OF THREE MONTHS MÍCHEÁL DE BARRA

---

Mícheál de Barra was trained as a psychologist at the National University of Ireland, Galway. He went on to complete a Ph.D. at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, where his research focused on the interplay of psychology, behavior, and infectious disease transmission. Before coming to Wiko, he spent two years at Stockholm University examining long-term changes in social norms concerning violence and hygiene. He also began looking at how and why harmful cultural traits spread and persist within human societies. Key examples of these traits include medicinal bloodletting and colostrum wastage. These questions are explored in the paper: “How feedback biases give ineffective medical treatments a good reputation.” *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 16, 8 (2014) August (with Kimmo Eriksson and Pontus Strimling). He is currently based at the Institute for Applied Health Sciences, University of Aberdeen. – Address: The Institute of Applied Health Sciences, Aberdeen, AB25 2ZD, Scotland. E-mail: mdebarra@gmail.com

What’s the use of a Life Sciences fellowship? These fellowships are shorter – three months in my case – and awarded to researchers who are earlier in their career. In this yearbook report, I’d like to reflect on my experience with this fellowship and the ways it influenced my research.

Newly minted Ph.D.s like me have few teaching or administrative duties. Unlike professors, we have lots of time to work on and think about research in our ordinary day jobs. For us, Wiko is not the great release that other more burdened researchers experience. In a three-month stint, a month or so is invariably spent finishing up older projects. Coupled with preparing talks, some long lunches, longer dinners, and separation

from lab colleagues, not a huge amount of tangible progress was made. Yet I would happily recommend the fellowship to friends. What then is the use of the fellowship?

First, you come see how your research program is connected to other disciplines. My area, psychology, overlaps with biology and neuroscience on one margin and with the humanities on the other. Psychologists are well positioned to benefit from the interdisciplinary stew in Wiko. My own research focused on the psychology of medicine and disease: Why are some medical treatments plausible and appealing? How do some medical treatments come to spread and persist in communities, despite their limited effectiveness? I found several Fellows who had considered these same questions in different terms and could make substantial contributions to my work and thinking. Historians, medical doctors, evolutionary biologists, and sociologists all had contributions and criticisms of real value. I hardly think I was lucky – with 40 Fellows with varied interests, any social scientist will find value in exchanging with the others. I particularly enjoyed interacting with the guests whom Fellows invited to stay for a few days. This open door policy at Wiko helped maintain a dynamic atmosphere throughout my stay. The new face at lunchtime was usually worth talking to.

Wiko attracts some exceptional scholars, and I got to know some researchers with ambition, drive, and creativity. In a small science lab, one interacts with just a handful of researchers, most of whom think and work much in similar ways. At Wiko, I met people who want to radically change our understanding of pathogens or finance or cancer. I have no idea if they will succeed, but it was certainly interesting to meet them.

Before arriving, I worried that the esteemed company would be a little staid. In fact, many of my companions were smart, warm, and congenial. Social life at Wiko hinges on Thursday night, when there's wine, dinner, whisky, and table tennis. That said, with no lunch and little happening in the Berlin suburbs, weekends could be a little dull. But breaking the fast came Monday Club, an informal evening institution in the clubroom featuring wine and the Life Sciences Fellows. Monday Club was a chance to dry-run presentations and to talk about our research. But more than that, it was a place to chat and laugh and make wonderful friends whom I deeply miss.

So that's why I would recommend the Wiko to any friend in research: the chance to work alongside scholars of different stripes and see how what they do relates to what you do; to see the ambition and drive of those who are changing their field; and to drink wine with people who become good friends. And if they were invited, here is what I would advise: to eat and drink and think in those beautiful buildings is a joy. Make it a habit to

work in the library or clubroom, especially at night when it's quiet. Get up early if you want get work done – after a big long lunch, not much happens. Keep an eye on the invited guest list – lots of interesting people pass through with time to chat. If you intend to arrive late in the year, come to Berlin for a fortnight and take the German course at the beginning of term. It's a good chance to meet everyone when everyone is meeting everyone.