

Roaming in Rome: EULAR 2015

By Philip A. Baer, MDCM, FRCPC, FACR

The 16th European League Against Rheumatism (EULAR) Congress took place in Rome in 2015; Rome was the site in 2010 as well. With the growth of the conference to over 14,000 participants, the choice of venues for EULAR is restricted. Trepidations at the time concerned the conference centre being close to the airport but quite far from downtown Rome, with limited transportation links. There were even rumours that the conference might be moved elsewhere, perhaps to Milan. Despite such concerns, I enjoyed attending EULAR 2010. I stayed with a group in downtown Rome near the Vatican. On the first day, I recall following the conference instructions and taking the Metro to the outskirts, where I was supposed to be able to find a EULAR shuttle to the conference centre. Emerging to the surface, I circled the entire Metro station without finding the appropriate bus or any EULAR signage. After 10 minutes, I worked out that I had to cross the street and descend to a parking lot at a lower level, where the shuttle buses were waiting. The transfer by this route took over an hour each way. While the conference runs about 10 hours a day, I really don't like to be stranded there the entire day with no other options, particularly so when I am in a wonderful tourist city like Rome. Eventually, our group organized a private shuttle bus to convey us daily from the hotel to the conference centre, which reduced the one-way transit to a manageable 45 minutes in air-conditioned comfort.

For 2015, the organizers decided to take a different approach. The same conference centre, Fiera di Roma—which resembles a series of 10 airplane hangars—was used. Shuttle buses were to be provided to and from the official hotels, similar to what is usually done for the American College of Rheumatology (ACR). However, this meant that there were even fewer official conference hotels than usual. EULAR opens for hotel bookings as of September for the next June. I have never been prepared to book a hotel in September; usually by the time I get around to it in December or January, all the hotels are booked. This

time I did not even try. I also noted that the usual EULAR transit pass included in the conference registration fee was no longer offered, given that the shuttle buses were being provided. My leading criterion for picking a hotel was to find one that provided easy transportation to and from the conference centre. With the help of my son, who seems to be somewhat of an expert in this matter despite his never having visited most of the conference cities, I selected the Hotel IQ Roma. It was both central to all the major attractions, as well as being very close to both Metro lines and a suburban rail link to the conference. My only other requirements were a quiet room, good hotel Wi-Fi, and on-site breakfast. All of these were met, providing the underpinnings for a successful conference. The hotel featured IQ-test-type puzzles on the walls and breakfast placemats. I could solve most of those; the most puzzling thing I could not understand was why the cleaning staff felt they had to replace my towels daily, despite my willingness to reuse them as a “green” consumer.



Some pre-congress siteseeing at the Roman Colosseum.



No evidence of osteoarthritis in this classic picture of repose.

Air Canada only has one direct flight per day to Rome so I took the precaution of reserving that as well, six months in advance. Arriving two days before the start of EULAR provided some time for adjustment to the time zone change, and to see some of the sites, including the Pantheon and Colosseum.

The conference occupied most of the rest of my time. Pre-planning is of the essence; I used the EULAR online application to customize my itinerary, deciding to focus on osteoporosis and rheumatoid arthritis (RA), as these were topics I had been asked to review in post-EULAR presentations for my colleagues. Osteoporosis is a manageable topic at this conference; RA, not so much. Restricting my search to podium presentations and those selected for poster tours winnowed down the field to a manageable number. At the last minute, I ended up presenting a poster on which I was author number seven, but otherwise I had time to wander randomly among the thousands of posters on display.

There were many Canadian attendees, including a cadre of excellent RheumReporters providing real-time updates in digestible chunks. Once again, kudos to Marlene and Dr. Andy Thompson and their team for doing such a great job. Check out Dr. Shahin Jamal's article on the history of gelato in particular: www.rheum-reports.com/?report=203&title=The_Gelaterias_of_Rome&c=EULAR_2015&r=%2F%3Fc%3DEULAR_2015.

Canadian content was also strong in every facet of the scientific meeting, from podium presentations to posters.



Only two coins in the fountain, still hoping for a possible future return to Rome.

Three of six basic science abstract award winners were Canadians. EULAR President Mauricio Cutolo pointed out that EULAR 2015 received over 4,300 abstracts, which were also the most highly rated ever, and accepted 3,500 (82%) for presentation. The program included 150 different sessions, 300 oral presentations, 350 invited speakers, 400 lectures, 40 poster tours, and 2,000 posters.

This year's edition also featured a Joint Congress between EULAR and the Pediatric Rheumatology European Society (PReS)—as is the case every three years—with an extended programme for pediatric rheumatology and various activities initiated by the PReS.

Themes that dominated the scientific presentations included new JAK inhibitors and IL-6 inhibitors for RA, de-escalation of therapy in RA, IL-17 inhibitors in spondyloarthritis (SpA), comorbidities in rheumatic diseases (smoking, obesity, cardiovascular risk factors) and the emerging field of biosimilars.

New EULAR recommendations and “points to consider” were highlighted, covering cardiovascular disease in RA, management of comorbidities in rheumatic diseases, and management of psoriatic arthritis (PsA).

Regarding steroid therapy in early RA, high-dose induction using the COBRA regimen has reported excellent results but never gained wide acceptance. This led to COBRA Light in 2013, and now in 2015 at EULAR we saw the results of the CareRA study comparing COBRA Classic, COBRA Slim (formerly COBRA

Light), and the new COBRA Avant-Garde. You cannot tell the regimens apart without a program, it seems. COBRA Slim appeared to be the winner (Abstract OP0180).

Other noteworthy initiatives included a new open-access rheumatology journal, *RMD Open*, launched by EULAR and the *British Medical Journal*; a platform for young rheumatologists called Emerging EULAR Network (EMEUNET); and one for young patients called YOUNG PARE.

Takeaways from Rome: A good talk/text/data plan is essential for “roaming in Rome”, and the competition amongst Canadian wireless carriers has certainly helped in that regard, as has the new Canadian wireless code of conduct, which prevents charges in the thousands of dollars for data use on GPS and apps.

An agent with an apt name, romo (romosozumab), looks like a future winning therapy in osteoporosis (Abstract OP0251).

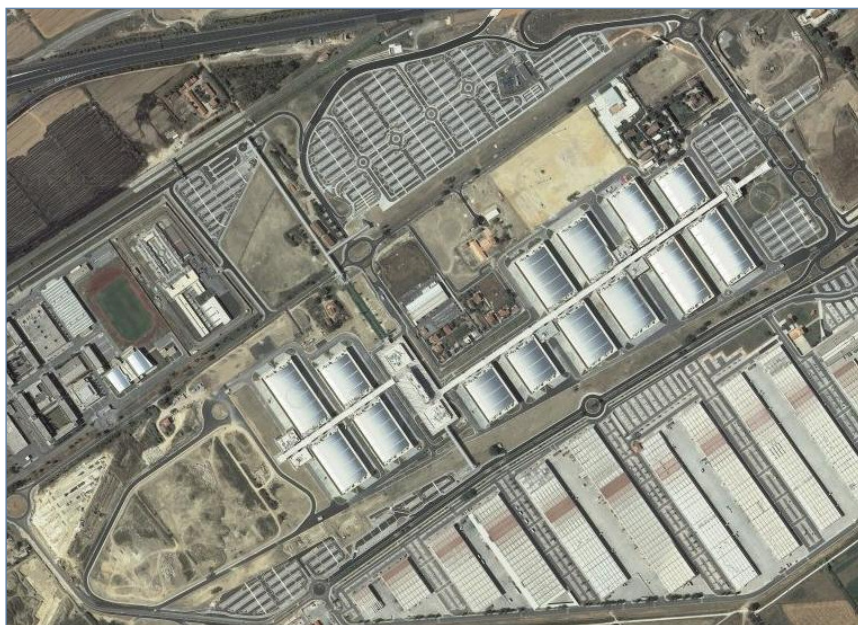
Rome’s new conference centre, the “Nuvola” (“Cloud”), will be closer to the centre of Rome in the EUR district. Nuvola was started in 2007 and scheduled to open in 2013, but now is only rumoured to open in 2017, already years late and over budget. Nothing to do with Italy, as Toronto subway expansions suffer from the same problems. I remember as well planning to arrive at EULAR 2012 in Berlin at their new Brandenburg airport, which as of now is projected to open perhaps in 2018.

The EULAR hotel and subway shuttles worked much better, with good signage and lots of people wearing “Ask Me” shirts around. EULAR even scrambled and provided some excellent shuttles from multiple locations around Rome during the four-hour transit strike on the opening day of the congress.

I will not be at EULAR 2016 in London as my son is getting married that weekend. Applications for someone



Fantasy: The Nuvola, the proposed new Roman conference centre.



Reality: An aerial view of the Fiera di Roma, current home of the EULAR conference.

to write a review of EULAR 2016 for the CRAJ can be sent to my attention.

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