

Net4Mobility⁺



Net4Mobility+

Network of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions National Contact Points for the mobile scientific and innovation community

Success Stories from MSC Fellows Hosted in Widening Countries

Task 4.4: Effective MSCA promotion

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Name of the MSC Fellow: Laura Willen

Nationality: Belgian

Host organization: Charles University

Country of the Host: Czech Republic

Project Acronym: Euroleish-net

Project start and end date: 1/7/2015 – 30/6/2018

Type of MSC action, H2020: ITN

Your story:

Project objectives and research field:

My research focuses on identifying antigenic proteins and their epitopes present in saliva of sand flies - bloodsucking insects which are the unique vectors of *Leishmania* parasites. These antigens were used in the preparation of a rapid test, which enables to determine host exposure to sand fly bites. The rapid test was field validated in Spain in regions endemic for canine leishmaniasis.

Tell us why your topic is important and/ or how it brings to advancement in your research field:

Leishmaniasis is known as the 2nd biggest parasitic killer in the world and is caused by the protozoan parasite of the genus *Leishmania*. It is endemic in all southern European countries and has recently been suggested to be spreading to northern areas. Since the domestic dog constitutes the main reservoir in Mediterranean Europe, the control of canine leishmaniasis (CanL) is essential. My project focuses on preparing a new epidemiological tool that enables a rapid estimation of sand fly biting prevalence in areas endemic for CanL. When a sand fly feeds on a host it injects saliva into the skin in order to facilitate the blood feeding process. The dog will mount an immune response against salivary proteins, which can then be used as a measure of exposure to sand flies and allow estimation on the risk of *Leishmania* transmission. In the field of vector exposure no rapid test has yet been described, making this research the first in its field.

What are the benefits of participating in a MSC action?

Participating in an MSC action gives you the opportunity to develop yourself on a scientific but also – and as important – on a personal level. It lets you engage in international conferences and meetings that allow you to interact with scientists who have been working in this field for decades. Exchanges between different organizations enable you to acquire new competences and to further increase your knowledge. Thanks to a MSC coordinated collaboration between CUNI and Coris

BioConcept we were able to successfully prepare the first rapid test in the field of vector exposure. Even more so, the MSC action granted a smooth cooperation among all participating partners and hence assured implementation of this rapid test in field conditions in Spain. The success of this particular MSC action is one step forward in the control of leishmaniasis and will in the future be a leading example and of crucial importance in the preparation of vector exposure tests for other vector-borne diseases.

Did you encounter any challenges during application/ implementation and did you get any help?

I did not experience any difficulties while applying for the fellowship. All application details and additional administrative issues were well taken care of by Charles University. Any ambiguities or uncertainties primarily owing to a language barrier were rapidly clarified and immediately solved by the University.

Why did you choose a widening country as a Host? What was the reason that convinced you? What is making you professionally happy here?

I found out about this MSCA fellowship through the website of the general project (Euroleish.net) and was attracted by the opportunity to join a training network that focuses on the control of leishmaniasis and to work together with a group of successful project supervisors. In order to apply, I wrote an extensive project proposal about the project I was most interested in, after which I was invited for a Skype-interview in which all beneficiaries and partner institutions of the project were present. When informed that I was selected for this particular project, I didn't need to be convinced and decided to grab the opportunity to work in one of the most renowned vector biology laboratories in the world and to learn from the best in the field, with both hands. Currently, I feel fortunate with the work I've finalized so far and with the intellectual and technical knowledge I've gained during this journey.

Would you recommend others to apply? What useful advice/ tips can you give them?

I would recommend others to apply. The opportunities you are given to broaden your horizons scientifically and personally are unique; you are given the chance to dive into a project, present your progress annually to all partners, display your results on international conferences, and collaborate with the other fellows and between institutions for a successful execution and implementation of the project. The road to achieving one's goal is never without any obstacles; however the extent of scientific

and personal development given to you by participating in a MSCA most certainly outweighs all.