



2020 EFIC Secondment Testimonial: Mary O’Keeffe

My name is Mary O’Keeffe. I am a physiotherapist and pain researcher based in Ireland. I completed my PhD in 2017 and was then awarded a Marie Curie Fellowship from the European Commission to support my research training and development. I spent two years at The University of Sydney, Australia, 9 months at the University of Limerick, Ireland, and 3 months at EFIC in 2020.

My time at EFIC was referred to as a secondment to a non-academic organisation. The aim of my secondment to EFIC was training in complementary and transferable skills, for example, public engagement, inter-sectoral or interdisciplinary knowledge transfer, building collaborations, communication skills, and organisational skills.

I loved my experience at EFIC and would highly recommend it to all pain researchers seeking out experience in a non-academic organisation. I was treated as a valuable team member from the beginning and given responsibility for tasks that capitalised on my pain science communication skills. EFIC provides a very dynamic working environment which is quite different from the traditional academic environment. In academia, it can be difficult to measure ongoing progress since the publication process can be quite slow. But at EFIC I was given meaningful targets to reach every week and this fast-moving atmosphere gave me a real sense of achievement. I was particularly impressed by EFIC’s Communication Team structure. Frequent contact through slack, email, and meetings created a very cohesive working environment where I always felt comfortable to ask questions or seek clarification on tasks. It was a pleasure to work with a large group of very motivated and kind individuals.

My role was divided into four main parts:

EFIC Communications

I helped develop a new comms strategy for EFIC. This involved reading and reviewing key materials provided by the EFIC office, attending a half day virtual workshop with the team as well as involvement in the drafting of the new strategy. This was a great learning experience and has equipped me with the skills to develop comms strategies going forward.

I assisted with engagement on EFIC’s social media channels (Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook) through providing topics for conversation and getting feedback on future congress topics. This is important training for young researchers as social media engagement gets more important. Engaging, while keeping to the science and avoiding major controversy, is a necessary skill to survive on Twitter! I developed a series of written and video materials on basic pain science concepts to be used as a lay introduction to the pain field. This is now called the ‘What is Pain’ Series and is available online. This is an excellent challenge for an academic as it makes one communicate what they know in very little time, and in lay language. It is harder than it looks!

I completed a series of blogs on health and disease awareness campaigns relevant to pain. These included Pain Awareness Month, World Cancer Day, World Sleep Day, and many more.

EFIC Virtual Pain Education Summit

My involvement in the Summit was the highlight of my time at EFIC. Organising a two-day event, with 4 educational tracks for different professions, as well as interprofessional sessions, in the middle of the COVID pandemic was a fantastic achievement. I was privileged to work with the dedicated team involved.



I mainly served in a supporting and coordinating role to ensure educational track leaders could communicate their track topics on social media. I did short interviews with the track leaders on the topic of why people should attend the Summit.

I helped organise the speakers for the Physiotherapy Track, and I was honoured to speak on psychosocial factors in low back pain in this track. I was delighted to be asked to chair the interprofessional session on Communicating with the Person in Pain. This was one of the most popular sessions of the Summit. I am already looking forward to my role in the 2021 Virtual Summit.

COVID-19 Task Force – physiotherapy papers

I became a member of the COVID-19 Task Force in mid 2020, and I am the project manager of the physiotherapy subgroup. I review all the recent papers published on COVID-19 and pain, related to physiotherapy. The important papers are summarised or commented on via EFIC's website. They are then circulated to the pain community via EFIC's direct mailings and social media. Given the importance of this Task Force in communicating research at this vital time, I remained in the role after my Marie Curie Fellowship.

Opioids position paper

EFIC developed a scientific position paper on opioids for chronic and non-cancer pain. The paper is published in the European Journal of Pain and represents a scientific consensus on the clinical management of these patients and will define the European approach to the opioids issue. I was involved in the development of the press approach, and the development of accompanying communication materials to help disseminate the paper on social media. I worked hard with my EFIC Comms colleagues to carefully articulate the messages of the paper. Overall, I had a fantastic experience at EFIC. I have developed a large interest in working in a non-academic pain environment. In hindsight, 3 months was too short, and I would recommend involving EFIC from the beginning of fellowship, for the full 3 years.