

Reflections from a First-time ASM Attendee

By Liza Abraham

It is the season of scientific conferences and meetings; avid conference-goers have their schedules prepared, posters printed, and flights booked. My first conference experience would be at the 2015 CRA Annual Scientific Meeting (ASM) in Quebec City, and it promised to be a memorable one. I was attending this national meeting to present a poster on the triage of rheumatology referrals by an advanced practice physiotherapist to facilitate wait-time benchmarks.¹ As a second-year medical student, I was nervous about having to present my research findings to a room filled with leading researchers and clinicians. Adding to this, I was scheduled to write a massive exam upon my return to Toronto. My flight to Quebec City was thus spent cramming for my exam and wondering to myself how I would get through the next few days.

Upon my arrival at the Fairmont Chateau Frontenac, I immediately noticed the ambient intellectual chatter around me. Old friends and colleagues were reconnecting since meeting a year ago. I headed into the large conference room where a networking session was being held, and introduced myself to the first person that I saw, Dr. Frances Leung. She turned out to be a community rheumatologist practicing in Toronto, so we chatted about my summer CRA studentship at Women's College Hospital. I was later joined by Dr. Dana Jerome, my summer clinic supervisor, who referred me to the new *Sli.do* app implemented by the conference organizers this year. The app connected me with other attendees on social media and provided useful information about keynote presentations and workshops.

Over the course of the CRA Annual Scientific Meeting (ASM), I had wonderful opportunities to network with practicing physicians and establish connections with students from medical schools across Canada. Each shared their personal reasons for choosing to practice rheumatology. It was refreshing to participate in such candid discussions about career choice and residency. From the moment I began medical school, I have been asked what specialty I am interested in, but much of a medical student's time is spent on finding the jugular venous pressure (JVP) or memorizing the anatomy of the brain. With such limited clinical experience, career decision-making can be a daunting process. Attending the ASM allowed me to reflect on my understanding of the nature of the rheumatology

specialty, and consider if these aligned with my own goals for residency and future medical practice.

On the day of my poster presentation I was incredibly nervous. I had spent the previous evening rehearsing in my room, thinking about how embarrassing it would be if I could not answer the attendees' questions. After throwing on my best suit, I headed down to the conference area and was relieved to see my supervisor waiting for me. She could tell I was nervous, but she reassured me that this audience would welcome my work. And she was right. There was a great deal of interest in the triage process utilized to improve access to care by patients; I was excited to share my findings and discuss opportunities for collaboration with others interested in health systems solutions and equity of access. It was a truly meaningful experience that allowed me to create new mentoring relationships with researchers and clinicians across Canada.

When we spend so much time in our first few years in medical school in a classroom learning to be medical experts, it can be very difficult for students to remember our CanMEDS roles of collaborator, scholar, and professional; however, these roles are all-important in ensuring an evidence-based approach is used to advance medical practice. Attending the CRA ASM offered a unique opportunity to share new innovations in research and practice, and create new mentoring relationships. Moreover, the career advice offered by both academic and community-practicing rheumatologists was invaluable.

Conferences are a great way to develop potential partnerships, build new relationships, and strengthen old ones. The CRA attendees are all experts in their field and were eager to teach me about their specialty. I took the time to ask questions, meet my colleagues, and explore the city that I was visiting. It was truly a memorable experience and I look forward to attending next year's ASM in Lake Louise, Alberta.

Suggested Reading

1. Gakhal N, Farrer C, Jerome D, et al. Triage of Rheumatology Referrals by an Advanced Practice Physiotherapist Facilitates Wait Time Benchmarks. Poster presented at the CRA ASM: 4-7 February 2015; Quebec City, Quebec. Available at: www.womens-collegehospital.ca/assets/pdf/CRA%20poster%20v2%20Jan%2029%2020151.pdf.

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