

IACAPAP PARIS 2012 – Through the eyes of an African recipient of the Donald J Cohen Fellowship

Like many others, when I first received the email informing me of my selection for the DJC Fellowship, I needed to read it twice to make sure I wasn't imagining it! In retrospect, maybe this is precisely the reason that fellows are selected - to be afforded the opportunity to reinforce one's sense of achievement, to teach one to question your chosen path, to make one wary while simultaneously building confidence. A tall order indeed!

It is a privilege to participate in a program that from a distance appears to target "like-minded" clinicians in a common field, yet at a closer look reveals a far greater blend of young people at varying stages in their careers. IACAPAP Paris 2012, enticed as a conference that would showcase "Brain, Mind and Development" as a pervasive theme. The anticipation of attending a conference that would speak to such a diverse theme was overshadowed only by the nervousness of engaging on a personal level with so many young fellows. Where the conference lived up to expectation in promoting a medley of basic sciences and advanced genetics alongside essential ingredients of "pure child psychiatry", the DJC Fellowship propelled one into an unexpected journey.

At first, the thrill of being part of a conference of this magnitude was quite palpable. Everyone scurries in and out of meeting rooms and lectures, all keen to attend as many talks as possible – while other more seasoned attendees calmly choose a few select presentations. Lesson number one for an over-eager young conference attendee – for maximum benefit, choose talks wisely, and relax – one cannot possibly attend everything! The richest offering perhaps to the young attendee was in the form of the poster presentations – a variety of topics, showcasing advanced research and imaging findings to interesting cases reports and clinically translatable research. A useful perspective for those of us from the continent who are used to "second guessing" our efforts, and opting not to submit to major conferences. International platforms such as IACAPAP served to promote research at varying levels of advancement, so that one could learn and identify at various stages.

It takes a certain amount of trust (that carefully hides the discomfort), having to introduce and share personal journeys with a group of strangers from such diverse

backgrounds. As the days progressed, the camaraderie amongst the fellows was evident, we weren't that different after all! We attended each other's presentations with great interest, and listened to ideas in group sessions with bated curiosity. As the trust developed, so too did the learning. The invaluable input from individual mentors and the fellowship co-ordinators made this program a melting pot of academic and personal growth.

The DJC program offered an opportunity to share – not only our successes and ambitions, but our mistakes, failures, and challenges. Suddenly it didn't seem that foolish to verbalize thoughts or opinions in a setting international experts and researchers. It is often said that leadership and learning are indispensable to each other. This program demonstrated exactly that. As a recently qualified child and adolescent psychiatrist from the southern-most tip of Africa, I join the ranks in a tiny and under-resourced fraternity. I am regularly faced with clinical dilemmas, academic stumbling blocks and resource nightmares, while trying to manage mental health problems in children with incomprehensible adversities. So my initial skepticism at sharing in this forum was fuelled by real thoughts – why would other professionals from more advantaged and developed settings be interested in my experiences? Who would identify with my challenges of treating HIV positive children not accessing mental health services, when the kinds of challenges facing others included writing successful grant applications or not getting published in the highest impact journals. What could we possibly learn from each other given the enormous gap between our experiences?

This perhaps was a steep learning curve for me and I am sure for the other fellows who represented Africa. Far too often we judge our efforts and clinical contributions relative to our colleagues from the developed world, and feel that in a way we don't really make any a meaningful difference to the greater scientific world. We are regularly accustomed to facing challenges like scarce resources, poor governmental support for health and inequities in training and career development. The DJC fellowship served as an invaluable sounding board, guided by internationally respected mentors who reinforced (and reassured!) us that no research is too small or too insignificant if it is done with passion and commitment. I discovered much to my surprise, that many people were interested in my experiences and many more were astounded by the quality of clinical and academic research that can originate from one of the worlds poorest and perhaps "academically disadvantaged" continents. While we may not produce

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mainstream research, we indeed contribute and significantly add to the world's awareness and understanding of mental illness in children affected by infectious diseases, poverty, extreme psycho-social adversity and trauma.

One of the lasting lessons to remember came from Professor Andres Martin – who regularly used the mantra “think globally but act locally”. Words that indeed need to resonate with African academics.

The DJC fellowship served as a platform to demonstrate what often is missed when people attend big international conferences – that while our challenges may differ – our ambitions are the same! We all want to be better at what we do, we all desire to make a difference in the lives of the children we treat. We all aspire to be the kind of leaders and experts that we scramble to listen to at these conferences. But perhaps the most important lesson learnt as a DJC Fellow, was that there is indeed “unity in diversity”, and no

people no this better than those from a diverse a continent as Africa.

As we all left Paris, feeling enriched by the experience, we also felt a sense of pride, that our contribution to the field of Child and Adolescent Mental Health, however small will still make an impact. Many of my colleagues would have returned to enviable academic institutions and child research centers, while others would return to their countries as the lone professional offering hope to millions of children, but one thing is for sure, all of us are reflecting on our experience and are indebted to the Donald Cohen Fellowship for the opportunity. From here forward, seeing the change, will be the end result of all true learning.

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ANNOUNCEMENT

Y-Mind Sao Paulo Advanced Science School

We are selecting 50 foreign graduate or post grad students with research projects in the area of prevention of mental health to participate in the Y-Mind Sao Paulo Advanced Science School, which will put together scholars and students in the city of São Paulo, to discuss projects in the area of Prevention of Mental, Emotional and Behavioral disorders. The event is funded by the State of São Funding Agency (FAPESP), which will cover travelling and accommodation expenses for the one week stay in the event. The event is to be held at the Federal University of São Paulo from the 25th to the 29th of March, 2013. The candidates will need to provide the following documents for submission:

- Title of the project with a brief description of their basic, clinical or translational research (upload file in the site);
- One letter of support (preferentially from mentor or Head of Department);
- A brief CV showing relevant published or submitted papers related to his/her research; (NIH model to upload from the site), with no more than 4 pages).

Although the research is not to be judged in comparison with the work of the more senior investigators, special consideration will be given to the originality of the approach and independence of thought evident in the submission.

All applications must be submitted on-line from the 15th October to the 15th November 2012 in the site www.ymind.com.br

Additional information can be obtained by contacting the email: ymind@ymind.com.br

Prof. Jair Mari

Coordinator of the Y-Mind Advanced São Paulo School

