

Thomas Wickham-Jones Major Research Fellowship 2019 – 2020

The Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto
Colin Leonard

I would like to thank the Thomas Wickham-Jones Foundation (TWJ) and Trustees for granting me the opportunity to further my education in clinical research at The Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto (SickKids). Dr Adrian James (Fellowship Director) and the Department of Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery within SickKids and the broader University of Toronto department provided a superlative fellowship experience.

In previous years the TWJ Fellowship awards at the University of Toronto had been to work with Dr John Rutka, so I was to be the first TWJ Research Fellow at SickKids. Any concerns that this might have raised were quickly assuaged in the months prior to my arrival by the manner in which Dr James encouraged and facilitated me to consider what I wished to learn and in what areas I might like to carry out research projects. The breadth of opportunity available at SickKids seemed staggering. I need not have worried: within hours of arriving in SickKids on my first day, the collegiate nature of the department and the abundant knowledge and experience with which I was to be guided was evident.

The day-to-day program and research activity were self-directed, but with Dr James available during his academic sessions each week to facilitate and guide as required. Initially, as I have no higher research qualification, I investigated a number of avenues available before primarily focusing on quality of life outcomes in cholesteatoma surgery. I was able to audit (that is to attend but not be assessed upon) “Biostatistics with R,” a MSc level course in utilising the open access software “R” for statistical analysis. The knowledge from this course and my chosen avenue of research allowed me to work closely with Dr James in relation to his work in otology outcomes, and also with Dr Karen Gordon (Archies Cochlear Implant Lab) and Robel Alemu (MSc) who were investigating sound localisation and the parameters of hearing that impact upon quality of life.

The educational program consisted of weekly SickKids teaching rounds on a Wednesday morning, followed by an imaging round with Dr Susan Blaser (Attending Neuroradiologist). These meetings provided a strong link to my clinical training and I would advocate that all trainees with an interest in Otology/Neurotology should spend time regularly reviewing scans with their radiology colleagues. Every Friday morning the University of Toronto Department of Otolaryngology – Head and Neck surgery hosted a Grand Round across Gerrard Street at Toronto General Hospital. These covered the entire breadth of our speciality and on several occasions visiting professors gave more expansive lectures on the preceding Thursday evening. Archies Cochlear Implant Lab also had a weekly meeting on a Friday where each member of the lab gave updates on their work and a collaborative approach was taken to problem solving. It was humbling to gain an appreciation of how our colleagues in research work on a daily basis. Whilst acting as a control in many of their studies I not only gained a better appreciation of research methods in cochlear implant and vestibular disorders, but also had quite a lot of fun!

In addition to these regular meetings the department ran a variety of evening lectures, seminars, CPD updates and journal clubs. The latter were graciously hosted at the home of faculty members and the educational standard was universally high. The educational programme had a very collegiate attitude and as a result of discussion at these meetings I have developed friendships and produced papers with a number of residents and fellows within SickKids and the university department.

Toronto itself is a remarkable city in which to live: vibrant, varied and in my experience not so cold during the winter as Torontonians like to make out! A city with something for everyone, I enjoyed rowing, sailing and paddle-boarding from the islands in the summer and weekly trips out of the city to cross-country ski in the winter. The city has an astounding array of entertainment and dining options no matter what your taste.

Whilst Dr James was my named fellowship supervisor, I was very much made to feel that I was a member of the wider department. Each and every member of the clinical staff and broader department was warm, welcoming and beyond generous with their friendship, time and knowledge. Whilst COVID-19 has resulted in the cancellation or postponement of many conferences, I know first-hand that the support and mentorship of the staff at SickKids extends far beyond the walls of the hospital. I cannot speak highly enough of how the team responded when I expressed a desire to return to the United Kingdom during the pandemic, so as to be available for clinical practice should the need arise. When it became evident that commercial flights were soon to cease the calm and supportive words of Professor Blake Papsin seemed to sum up the familial nature of his department. On my return to the United Kingdom I was able to remain actively involved in the educational program via Zoom and with remote access was able to continue to analyse data, liaise with colleagues in Toronto and submit papers. During these months, Dr James has willingly continued to comment, review and edit my work and I have no hesitation in describing him as a quintessential mentor: one with whom I hope to have a long working relationship and friendship.

COVID-19 and cutting my time in Toronto by four months has undoubtedly had an impact upon my fellowship, but that is not to say it has detracted from it. A TWJ Major Research Fellow of any research background could easily be accommodated at SickKids. Whilst my work had a clinical focus, a surgeon-scientist with a PhD in cochlear physiology would just as easily be facilitated within the Cochlear Implant Lab. I have two aims going forward in my career as a result of my fellowship. Firstly, that I may do justice to the opportunities I have been afforded by SickKids and TWJ, even if I struggle to do so in this report. Secondly, I look forward to using what I have learnt to not only optimise the care I provide to my patients but to advance the care we provide.