

TWJ Otolaryngology, Neurotology and Skull Base Fellowship

Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada 2020-2021

Fellow: Gaurav Chawdhary

Supervisors: Professor David P Morris and Dr Nael Shoman

I am very grateful to the TWJ Foundation for awarding me the excellent opportunity of an international Fellowship in Otolaryngology, Neurotology and Skull Base Surgery in Halifax, Canada. In terms of advanced surgical training, the Fellowship year delivered in spades. I feel I have grown hugely in terms of my experience, clinical/surgical capability and confidence and am very well placed for tertiary level UK Consultant practice.

My Fellowship journey really began in the winter of 2018 – now an age ago - when I attended the national TWJ interview at the Royal College of Surgeons of England. The interview itself was a pleasant experience and took place in a well-appointed, wood-panelled room filled with luminaries of British Otolaryngology. I was delighted to receive the phone call later that day telling me that I had been successful and was headed to Canada.

In the ensuing months, my family began making arrangements in earnest to obtain the relevant permits and visas. By February 2020, we were all set. Then, COVID hit. As the famous Scottish poet Robert Burns (whose statue incidentally stands in Halifax's own Victoria Park) said some 200 years ago,

'The best laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft a-gley'.

So here we were, poised to go, passports at the ready - but with no idea when (or if) we were going to get permission. I became intimately familiar with the machinations of the Canadian immigration system, which posted near daily updates on who was/was not allowed to fly. Thankfully, about ten days before the start of my Fellowship, I received the welcome news that as I was a healthcare worker, my family would be allowed to board. At last, we were on our way.

Halifax is an East Coast port city and is the capital of Nova Scotia. It is well known for its University, its tourism and its naval base which houses the nation's Atlantic Fleet. It is also an extremely friendly place and we felt this right from the moment we disembarked. During our time there we felt very welcome and were amazed at how easily we slotted into the local community. Halifax is a big city but it has the feel of a medium-sized town – people tend to smile at and greet each other on the street and if someone is in difficulty, or appears lost, others will gladly come to their aid.

After two weeks of quarantine, I ventured to the ENT department and met my supervisors, Professor David Morris and Dr Nael Shoman. Both are true gentlemen, very friendly supervisors and extremely skilled at their art. Professor Morris trained in the UK before leaving for Canada and we therefore had instant common ground. He is a very generous and confident trainer and taught me his many tried and tested techniques. I will certainly carry these forward in my own practice. Dr Shoman is Fellowship-trained in Neurotology from the University of Cincinnati and I learned a more American style of practice from him. It was very interesting to compare and contrast my own UK training with that of the American system and it was extremely useful as a surgeon to see that there's 'more than one way to skin a cat'.

Fortunately, the pandemic had a comparatively small impact on Nova Scotia and this meant that the majority of my operating during the Fellowship ran as normal; we lost very few sessions to Covid and I am extremely grateful for this, knowing the havoc it has created for surgical training around the world. All in all, I received a very broad, well-rounded education and have come away with a versatile otological toolkit.

The department provides a tertiary referral service to four Canadian provinces and as a result I saw a very broad range of cases, from routine to complex, common to extremely rare. The standard week consisted of two full days' theatre and two days' clinic. However, this was subject to great variability week-on-week; typically, extra theatre days would be added on for one or other supervisor to cover skull base or paediatric operating and it would not be unusual for me to be in theatre three or four days out of five. The spread of cases covered the full range of Otology/Neurotology and included myringoplasty/tympanoplasty, mastoidectomy (canal wall up as well as canal wall down with primary obliteration), blind sac closure, temporal bone resection, superior semicircular canal dehiscence, CSF leak repair, surgical treatment of Ménière's disease, ossiculoplasty, stapes surgery, BAHA, bonebridge and cochlear implants. There was also a dedicated temporal bone lab available to me 24 hours a day, seven days a week to drill and hone my skills.

Once or twice a month the Maritime Lateral Skull Base clinic would run. The otologists have a close working relationship with their neurosurgical colleagues and acoustic neuroma cases are operated upon jointly in neurosurgical theatres, on average once a month. The Skull Base Clinics were an excellent repository of interesting cases and provided ample opportunity for discussion and learning. We also provided a service to the Children's Hospital with once a month paediatric otology clinics for complex paediatric cases that were posing a challenge to paediatric ENT colleagues. These clinics generated regular additional theatre lists for us at the Children's Hospital.

As a Fellow, I was treated as a junior Faculty. I had teaching responsibilities from medical student level right up to senior resident, which I greatly enjoyed. I gained proficiency as a

trainer in theatre and would often be left to guide the resident through the operation before taking over for the more advanced steps.

I had a wonderful experience in terms of research too. The SENSE lab is a world-renowned lab that has pioneered work on Optical Coherence Tomography of the ear. I found it very rewarding working with the SENSE lab scientists on research that will lead to a number of impactful publications in the near future. This experience showed me how powerful multidisciplinary research can be. I will certainly be taking forward this multidisciplinary approach in my own work going forward.

As a life experience for my family, the Fellowship year will remain among our most cherished memories. The weekends and holidays were filled with fun activities, new sights, sounds and flavours. We have made many great friends and definitely intend to return. Overall, the experience was far richer than I can perhaps do justice to on paper, but I will simply say that I would highly recommend it. You will not regret it!