

**Adam Stevenson, BSc(Hons), MIAT RAnTech**

**2022 IAT recipient of the AAALAC International Fellowship Award**

I initially became aware of the IAT/AAALAC Fellowship through my undertaking the IAT level module course and discussing the RAnTech application and I must confess that during the 2 years between getting my level 3 IAT diploma and getting my RAnTech status I had forgotten about the fellowship opportunity. So, some years later when I completed my interview for getting my RAnTech status and having moved from my prior employment in the private sector to my old alma mater, the University of Liverpool, to the position of research technician, I decided to look back into the fellowship and submit my application.

I didn't expect much success as I'm not the head of a department or a facility manager, as I have been in my mind a straightforward animal technician whose primary responsibility was welfare and performing procedures. However, I thought I did at least have 11 years of experience under my belt and had worked in varied animal care and use programs, from high throughput corporate drug development work to public sector grant-based research projects. Much to my surprise I was informed that I was selected for the 2022 award but due to Covid restrictions I would wait for the 2023 award so I would be going with another Fellow.

Once I got my vaccination paperwork, ESTA, proof of immunities and such sorted (all paid for by AAALAC International) it was off to the United States for a 2-week trip that would shift my view of my work and calling of over a decade. Nothing much to say for the travel, a Transatlantic flight isn't for everyone but it's a chance to catch up on some movies on the 'to watch' list at least.

I arrived in Washington, D.C. a day early so I had a total of 2 days to myself for tourist purposes and decided to make the most of it. One thing that can be said about D.C is that there were days' worth of sights within walking distance all around the National Mall. First there was the White House followed by the Washington Monument, the Jefferson Memorial and the Lincoln Memorial. After a quick lunch it was time for the museums. Starting with the Library of Congress where I got to see Thomas Jefferson's own book collection and the Gutenberg Bible, then there was the National Archives which houses the Declaration of Independence. Finally, the Smithsonian with its art, air and space and natural history museums where there were fine collections of dinosaurs and artefacts, such as the original Wright Brothers Flyer and the Apollo 11 capsule and space suits from the moon. There was so much to see it kept me busy all the way through the second day.



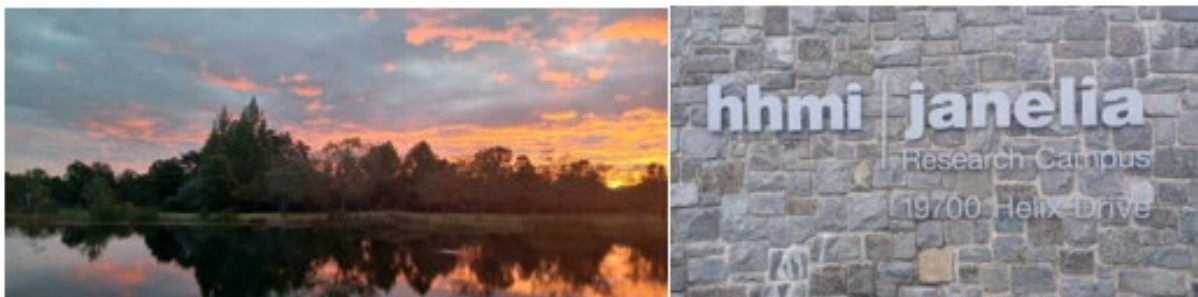
The third day began the official fellowship visits and first on the list was the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland. The other Fellow and I were taken there by Dr. Rob Weichbrod who was very welcoming and a rich source of information and context on the research being done at the NIH's Intramural Research Program facilities, as well as AAALAC and specifically the Fellowship Award Program, of which I had been selected as the 2022 Fellow. The NIH facilities were fascinating with many varied departments, not just in terms of animal species being housed there but in the kinds of research equipment used. Highlights for me were the Mouse Imaging Facility (MIF) with its

multiple MRI scanners and we were able to observe an ultrasound being performed on a mouse as part of a real study. There was also the new purpose-built nonhuman primate space for social housing and improved enrichment as well as the hibernation setup for their ground squirrels, a species that I hadn't seen before in research.



All the people we spoke to were knowledgeable and approachable which helped with how overwhelming it could otherwise have been with the rapid-paced nature of the visit. Come the evening we were dropped off at the next facility which was the Janelia Research Campus in Ashburn, Virginia.

The visit began with dinner in the evening and then getting to stay in one of the guest suites that's part of the facility, which hands down was one of my overall highlights. The rooms were 4–5-star tier and the lakeside view was just a gorgeous thing to wake up to and get to enjoy from my room. This facility was the highlight of the trip for me, Jim Cox and his team were so enthusiastic, and I got to see facilities outside and within my field I'd not seen before. Getting to give feedback into the design of the outdoor rat enclosure and feeling like it was appreciated and taken on board was a definite plus for me. Their Mouse and Rat city designs for behavioural modelling and environmental enrichment were fantastic. The fly suite was certainly different and the entire facility was decorated with beautiful scans and images of the neuron work they've been doing, blending aesthetic and scientific data brilliantly. The whole facility with its complimentary and impressive gym and climbing suites, subsidised restaurant, and lovely lakeside walks gave me a great sense of envy, as their goal of forming a scientific community was made amply clear and they have truly succeeded in that goal. I was asked to give a presentation on my career as a technician and initially I was very self-conscious, having social anxiety doing a 20-minute talk about myself is a daunting task, but it was well received and the audience seemed invested, which was gratifying.



After departing from the Janelia Research Campus, we were taken to the AAALAC Executive Office in Frederick, Maryland and got to meet the team who coordinated the Fellowship and they were so welcoming and hospitable. Getting to learn more about the sheer scale of the organisation was

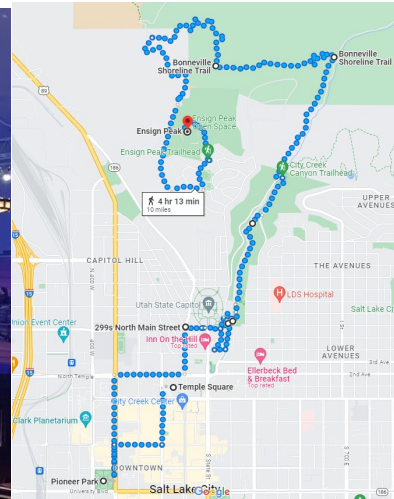
fascinating and the contrast of it to my own Home Office was certainly interesting. They also presented me with a goodie bag (shan't spoiler it for future Fellows but it was brilliant and very useful). Then we went to meet with Matt Bailey who leads the Foundation for Biomedical Research (FBR) and the National Association for Biomedical Research (NABR). Their team I didn't know anything about but after hearing about their work to raise awareness of the truth of animal research with both the public and with Congress, fighting the lobbyists and activists with limited resources with all the passion for our field I left feeling grateful for those people. Theirs is a hard job with the odds stacked against them.



From NABR and the AAALAC Executive Office it was back to Washington, D.C. for an evening and morning of further tourism before flying out to Salt Lake City, Utah. I went to see the National Zoo and their newborn gorilla and the giant pandas, well worth it and it's free to boot.



Salt Lake City, Utah is very different from Washington, D.C., in that the whole valley is so picturesque. D.C. had a lot of woodland mixed with open lakes and dense urban structures. Salt Lake City is much more spread out, with the mountains in the distance snow-capped and ever-present stand behind vast dry planes, whilst the urban areas are more spread out to accommodate the rather helpful tram system. With my free day there I went to a local farmers market for some locally sourced apple cider donuts and juice, then went on a day long hike several miles up into the hills, climbing to a peak overlooking the city and the entire ancient lake. A view I'll remember for years to come. First thing you'll notice is stairs and hiking leave you a bit breathless as you adjust to being a mile above sea level. I also spent Sunday at Temple Square to see the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, which was a beautiful show regardless of faith.



Before the AALAS conference we were taken to the facilities of the University of Utah and there we viewed the on-campus hospital where research and bedside care are brought together. There were pig, pigeon and alligator facilities and these were all fun to see, especially the alligators. The last thing you expect to see at 5000ft elevation is an alligator trying to splash water at you. Currently working for the University of Liverpool it was nice to see a fellow University campus across the water and compare differences in facilities and operations.



Finally, we arrived at the annual AALAS National Meeting, and it was a whirlwind. I was attending talks or trying to complete the treasure hunt/quiz of the vendors from 8am till 5pm. In the evenings I was invited to the LabDiet Awards formal dinner one day then out with the Janelia staff another night and finally the AAALAC International luncheon award ceremony for the final day. I gave a short

speech upon receiving my award with the take home message of ‘I came here believing I was part of a profession. I leave knowing I’m part of a driven, determined, and dedicated community.’



That sentiment, of community and changing my view of my place within is the core of my experience with the Fellowship Program and one that I will treasure going forward. It gave me fresh insight and motivation to find more communities within my field to exchange ideas with, and to network and be part of this greater scientific community. I have encouraged my colleagues to attain their IAT qualifications and encourage all of them to pursue your RAnTech status and apply for the AAALAC Fellowship Award. It’s a genuine pleasure well worth the jetlag and exhaustion of a 28-hour journey home.

