

The AAALAC International Fellowship 2018

To be counted amongst the elite band of AAALAC Fellows is a real honour. This became apparent to me when I entered Dr Robert Weichbrods office during my visit to the National Institutes of Health Campus and saw all the previous eminent Fellows displayed on his wall.

I received notification that I had been awarded the 2018 Fellowship in early July. Soon after the planning was underway. It was not going to be long before I was jetting off across the pond for a fantastic experience. It was humbling to receive many messages of congratulations from U.K. and U.S. colleagues. Elizabeth, from the AAALAC Office was soon in contact with a checklist of things that I needed to take care of including flight bookings, National AALAS Meeting registration and of course the travel documentation such as a valid ESTA. As the weeks passed, regular updates on the itinerary were sent and it was clear that any idea of a holiday was dismissed immediately – this was going to be a full on experience.

For the first week, I would be based in Bethesda, Maryland, visiting some major facilities in the area and learning about their Animal Care and Use Programmes. The second week would be spent at the National AALAS Meeting in Baltimore.

After an uneventful flight from London Heathrow to Washington Dulles Airport, I was collected by car and taken to the hotel in Bethesda. Jetlag kicked in around 4am on Sunday which, luckily, was a free day for recovery.

I had booked a Trolley Bus Tour of Washington D.C. and hopped on the Metro just outside of the hotel. It took me a good five minutes to figure out how to get a ticket though! The bus tour was excellent and it gave me the chance to see the major sights by hopping on and off at various locations. I spent a bit of time at the Lincoln Memorial, and the Korean and Vietnam War memorials. I also took a tour of the amazing Arlington National Cemetery before getting back on the bus to return to the starting point. Having worked out what I wanted to see in more detail, I took a walk to the National Archives in which I



*JFK Memorial
Arlington National Cemetery*



*Korean War Memorial
Washington DC*

saw the Constitution, Bill of Rights and Declaration of Independence; a visit to the White House visitors centre and finally a walk around the White House to wave at Mr. Trump! It was interesting to see a number of protests at the back of the White House and the incredible security presence but I suppose it was no different than what we see outside the Houses of Parliament and Number 10.

An early start on Monday was no problem as I again woke at 4am! I was collected from the hotel by Dr. Robert Weichbrod, one of the founding fathers of the Fellowship Award. He drove me to the University of Maryland campus where I was met the attending Veterinarian who showed me various facilities on campus, many of which required a drive as it covers such a large area. The range of species on campus is incredible—everything from rodents, alligators, owls and aquatics to farm animals. It was great to meet the animal care staff and it was clear they were committed to a high level of care and welfare. I also had the opportunity to visit the Office of Animal Welfare Assurance which is responsible for the operation of the Institutional Animal Care and Use Programme and compliance. Whilst touring the large animal facilities and meeting some of the new calves that had just arrived, I was able to hear about the American College of Laboratory Animal Medicine (ACLAM) as students were on site learning about sample collection from fistulated cattle.



One of the new modern facilities at University of Maryland

After a long day of walking and learning, I was dropped back at the hotel for a fast turnaround where I quickly packed an overnight bag ready to be picked up again and driven to The Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) in Ashburn, Virginia, near the Washington Dulles Airport. It was becoming apparent after just a couple of days that driving anywhere around the Washington Metropolitan area is tedious especially at peak times. However, the long car journey to HHMI gave plenty of time for Dr. Weichbrod and I to get to know each other.

It was dark when we arrived at the HHMI Janelia Research Campus but even in the dark it was evident that this was no ordinary facility. Dr. Weichbrod and I were accompanied for dinner by the Shared Resource Director. The superb dinner was in the campus's own full service restaurant. I was to stay onsite overnight at their own fantastic quality hotel.

My body clock was still not quite adjusted but a 6am wake up was a slight improvement. Arriving in the dark I didn't appreciate the view that was outside of my hotel window and as the dawn started to break I was treated to a stunning view over a lake. It encouraged me to get up and take a bracing sunrise walk around the lake and take some photos. The campus reminded me a little of the sites I used to work at with Beecham and GSK. After taking breakfast at the restaurant I was met again by the Director to start a full day of visits and discussions with his team.



Sunrise over the HHMI Janelia Research Campus

My first stop on the tour was the surgical suites where I met some of the incredibly dedicated team who carry out surgical procedures and aftercare on behalf of research teams working at the institute. It was here that I learnt a striking contrast between U.S. and U.K. legislation and how science can be facilitated. The surgery that was being

performed was postponed from the previous day as it was found that the procedure was not included on the IACUC protocol. The animals had already undergone some surgical procedures consistent with the protocol but this was a new intervention. It required a fast approval turnaround. Approval was given following detailed email correspondence and justification with the chair of the IACUC committee and key members. Hence the surgery was authorised to proceed the following day. It made me think about how this situation would be dealt with in the U.K. There was a clear benefit in that the animals did not need to be culled and the study could continue. This would not have been the case in the U.K.



The innovative "Valve Stop"

I spoke with many other members of the Biological Services teams and enjoyed tours of some extremely interesting facilities including *Drosophila* robotics, state of the art cagewash facilities, a vast number of aquatic species and the rodent breeding and experimental areas. Of interest to me, as we have Automatic Watering at the ICR, was a device designed and produced at the HHMI called "Valve Stop." A very simple concept for preventing a cage of animals being replaced in a rack space that does not have a watering valve in place. The day was completed with a very interesting discussion with the Chair of the IACUC where we discussed the approval process and the comparisons I mentioned above. It was time to bid farewell to an incredible research facility.

I had plenty of time to discuss my visit with the Director on the tedious journey back to Bethesda – and we thought travelling on the M25 was bad!



The immense NIH Campus at Bethesda

After a full night of sleep it was time to meet, once again, with Dr. Robert Weichbrod for two days of visits at the expansive National Institutes of Health Campus at Bethesda. To say this place is huge would be an understatement so try and imagine grouping 21 or so of the largest U.K. animal facilities in an area the size of Hyde Park. The campus has its own police and fire departments. Amongst the 75 buildings on campus, it has the World's largest Clinical Research centre and accommodates over 20,000 employees. Security is tight and on arrival I had to present my passport and undergo airport-style security.

My first stop of the day was the Office of Animal Care and Use (OACU) where I was given an overview of the NIH Animal Care and Use Programme. The small team oversees compliance for 21 IACUCS on the campus, an immense task. The rodent use numbers on the campus alone are two thirds that of the whole of the U.K.

My first experience of aquatics was on Monday and very interesting it was too. This was to be just a taster of the facility that I was next to enter and I am glad I had gained a little background knowledge. I met the manager of the lab animal and fish facilities. She gave me a tour of the huge facility capable of housing up to half a million fish. I was also able to accompany a veterinarian on her rounds and was fascinated by the level of detail required to identify abnormalities in the fish colonies of this scale (excuse the pun!).

During a working lunch, I gave a short presentation on my work at the Institute of Cancer Research to a team of animal facility staff and the Priority One Services management team. Lunch was followed by a tour of a multi-species central animal facility. I was able to see interesting behavioural work being carried out using non-human primates (NHPs) and the play and enrichment areas for these animals was of particular interest to me. The surgical areas were just like human operating theatres with state of the art equipment and clinical conditions. They also had the ability to video display surgery as it was happening for student training purposes. A huge part of the NIH work involves research into neurological disorders and I was fortunate to be able to meet some of the key investigators in this field and observe their work with both ferrets and NHPs. It was a fascinating insight into a clinical area that is becoming more and more important in an aging population.

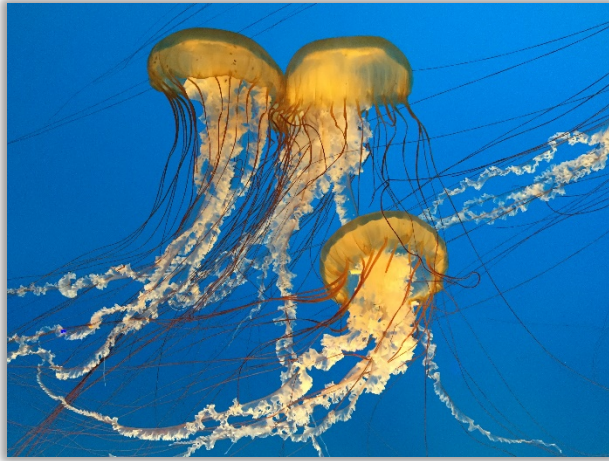
The day-and-a-half tours of the NIH were certainly a mind-blowing experience and I feel that I only really scratched the surface on the incredible research that is carried out on this immense campus. It was time to leave NIH and following an hour drive north to Frederik, Maryland, we visited the AAALAC International Executive Office. A detailed overview of the accreditation programme was followed by a delicious lunch. AAALAC International has more than 1000 accredited programmes in 47 countries and it is an objective of mine to seek accreditation at the ICR facilities in the future. Accreditation is a performance-based model encouraging continual performance improvement. Of course AAALAC International is also the awarding body of the International Fellowship Award. This award is open to IAT Registered Technologists and I would encourage anyone with that status to look out for the promotional material and apply.

After a fantastic evening meal with members of the Priority One Management team it was back to the hotel for a well-earned rest. My last day of facility visits would be probably the most eventful. I was met early after checking out of the Bethesda Hotel and taken to the Federal Drug Administration Campus in White Oak, Maryland. We arrived just as the sun was rising we entered via the loading bay of the animal facility. It transpired that as a foreigner, I should have registered my details seven days in advance and there was no way I was getting in. After a couple of hours, and I am sure a lot of negotiation, I was finally allowed into the facilities and was given a rather quicker tour than planned. The FDA facilities are modern and house multiple species including NHPs up to bio-containment level 3. It was a fascinating insight into the work of the FDA and I admit, prior to visiting I didn't realise the FDA actually carried out animal research as well as oversee the conduct of research and approval of medicines.



The FDA White Oak Campus

It was time to leave the busy Washington D.C. area and the fantastic array of research facilities that I had experienced and head north to Baltimore. I was driven by the founder of Priority One Services. We had to grab lunch on the way and there was plenty of choice – McDonalds, Wendy's, KFC etc. To my host's amazement I opted for his recommendation of Cuban. What a fantastic lunch it was too. It was an opportunity for me to learn more about Priority One and how the management of animal facilities varies to the U.K.



Amazing jellyfish at the National Aquarium, Baltimore

After checking into my Baltimore hotel, it was a short drive to the National Aquarium where a few of the colleagues I had met earlier in the week and Dr. Weichbrod would be treated to a behind the scenes tour of the facilities. It was a fascinating two hours seeing the management of the many species of aquatics including the pathology areas, the water treatment, food preparation and of course the back of house displays. We had the opportunity to interact with a young male octopus as he was being fed and it was a bizarre experience. I really didn't appreciate how much grip and power they would have in their tentacles.

It was great to attend another National AALAS and to be back in Baltimore again. I previously visited Baltimore five years ago and the city was familiar to me so navigation was not a problem.

It was good to meet up with my fellow "Brits" and to share my weeks experience with them. On Sunday we enjoyed a self-guided tour and luncheon at the University Of Maryland School Of Medicine. A very large new animal facility located in the heart of the city. Sunday evening was the PMI International Awards Dinner. I was honoured to receive this award in 2016 in Charlotte, North Carolina, and it was great to be back with old colleagues from PMI and previous awardees.



The team of "Brits" at the PMI Dinner

The National AALAS Meeting is on a scale not seen anywhere else in our industry worldwide. As a member of the IAT Congress Committee it is always worthwhile looking at various ideas from other similar meetings. It was good to catch up with exhibiting colleagues and to meet many new faces. There are always some very interesting posters displayed but with hundreds to look at it does take a while to filter along the rows to find ones of interest. Scientific presentations and workshops run all day from 8 am through 5 pm each day and often with multiple parallel sessions.

On Wednesday the AAALAC/AALAS/ICLAS International luncheon is held and so it was time to scrub up and don a suit to formally receive my award. It was amazing to meet some of the past award recipients and also to meet and chat with the 2019 US recipient. The time had come to receive my award and that nervous moment of giving an acceptance speech but thankfully I was asked to keep it short and so it



Receiving my award with Lisa Secret from Priority One and Jonathan Wood from Datesand Group.

wasn't too bad. It was a very proud moment to receive the award and to be amongst such eminent colleagues.

There is always something to do in the evenings thanks to the very generous support of some of the exhibiting companies. On Monday evening a number of us took a cab out of town to a highly recommended Indian restaurant and we were not disappointed. The owners were extremely hospitable and we even had our photo taken for their Facebook page! On Tuesday evening I joined Priority One Services for a fantastic meal. I cannot thank the team at Priority One for their kind sponsorship of the AAALAC Fellowship and for their incredible hospitality throughout the trip. They are an excellent team. Traditionally at National AALAS, the attending Brits meet up for a meal and a few drinks on the Wednesday evening.



Halloween in Fells Point, Baltimore

Time had come to head home back over the pond but not before an impromptu trip back to Washington D.C. with some British colleagues for a short sightseeing tour. It was a fantastic way to end a most amazing two-week experience.

Receiving the AAALAC International Fellowship Award is humbling, inspirational and truly rewarding. It is an experience of a lifetime to be able to be given access to some of the most important research establishments in the US.. and to meet some incredible researchers, animal care staff and veterinarians. The experience is organised with military precision and the dedication of the team that take time out of their day to make sure that I experienced a wide spectrum of research is fantastic. My most sincere thanks must go to the team at Priority One Services and Datesand Group who sponsor the award. To Dr. Robert Weichbrod, one of the founding fathers of this amazing award, thank you for your insight and continued support of the Fellowship. To all the staff at AAALAC International for organising a busy schedule and for continuing to promote and offer this experience.



The AAALAC International Fellowship Award

To all Registered Animal Technologists in the UK, like previous award recipients, I cannot stress enough how valuable this experience is. I encourage you to apply for the award and if not successful keep applying. It offers the most unique opportunity and experience in our industry.

Allan Thornhill FIAT, RAnTech

Head of Biological Services, Institute of Cancer Research.