

AAALAC Fellowship Report – 2025

Nothing could have prepared me for the surprise of being selected as the 2025 AAALAC International Fellow. The AAALAC International Fellowship Program Committee members felt it was fitting that my director personally pass on the news, which only added to the significance of the moment.

I arrived at Washington Dulles International Airport in the United States in Virginia on Saturday evening, located my hotel, found some food, and settled in for some much-needed sleep. On Sunday, I navigated the Metrorail to Georgetown, a historic neighbourhood in Washington, D.C. The weather was unexpectedly warm, which only enhanced the beauty of this historic and affluent neighbourhood in Washington, D.C., known for its 18th-century architecture and waterfront along the Potomac River. After a couple of hours exploring Georgetown, I headed towards the White House. Unlike previous fellows, my trip was impacted by the ongoing Federal Government shutdown, which meant many government-run buildings and tourist hotspots were closed, and there was active protesting taking place. Despite this, I was still able to see the White House, the Washington Monument, the World War II Memorial, and the Reflecting Pool. During my walk back to the Metro station, I also passed the Original Founding Church of Scientology. With a busy week ahead, I made my way back for dinner and an early night.



Sculpture in Georgetown



The Potomac River



The White House

AstraZeneca and Janelia Research Campus

On Monday, I was kindly collected by Dr. Robert Weichbrod for my visit to AstraZeneca. Due to the United States government shutdown, a planned visit to the National Institutes of Health was unable to proceed, and at short notice AstraZeneca generously stepped in to host me for the day. I was given an excellent overview of their vivarium, internal processes, and research models.

The vivarium housed mice and rats, with a focus on oncology research as well as cardiovascular, renal, and metabolic studies. The team demonstrated a GLP-1 model using obese rats. Dosing during the study was carried out orally, with most of the animals participating in voluntary dosing, demonstrated using condensed milk. Throughout the study, the rats' fat, lean muscle mass, and water levels were measured.

At the end of the visit, Dr Weichbrod collected me and took me to the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Janelia Research Campus. Janelia is an interdisciplinary research campus designed to tackle long-term, technology-driven biological challenges. Janelia has conference hotel rooms on campus for visitors, allowing me to stay overnight ahead of my tour. I was warmly welcomed by Senior Director Mr. Jim Cox and members of his team for a relaxed dinner, which was a wonderful opportunity to meet the team in an informal setting. Janelia is currently expanding its vivarium facilities, particularly its aquatic provision, and Dr. Weichbrod and I were given a tour of the construction area. It was fascinating to learn about their plans to create a more naturalistic aquatic environment, affectionately known as the "lazy river" of the aquatic's world.



Sunrise at Janelia

The following day, I had a packed itinerary covering training and projects, surgery, rodent behaviour and experimental support, and invertebrate shared resources. This was followed by me giving a talk to the Janelia team about my career pathway and the work we do at King's College London. I had underestimated the size of the audience and was pleasantly surprised to

find approximately 15–20 team members in attendance in person, with others joining online. Despite my initial nerves, the session became interactive, and the time passed quickly.

In the afternoon, I had the opportunity to learn more about the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC). The IACUC was very similar to the United Kingdom's Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Body (AWERB). It oversees and evaluates all aspects of an institution's animal care and use programme. Both committees aim to balance scientific need with animal welfare and emphasise the 3Rs. One key difference was that AWERBs tend to have a wider advisory remit around project licensing, whereas IACUCs focus more on protocol-specific approval and compliance. Aside from the impressive facilities, what stood out most at Janelia was the evident culture of care and the strong sense of teamwork.

AAALAC International Executive Office, NABR and FBR

Wednesday began with lunch with the AAALAC International team, which provided another opportunity to reflect on my Janelia visit with Dr. Weichbrod during the journey to the Executive Office. I received a very warm welcome from the AAALAC team, including several individuals I had previously corresponded with during the planning stages of my fellowship experience. Dr Borkowski, the AAALAC International Chief Executive Officer led a presentation on the history, achievements, and goals of AAALAC. I found it particularly impressive to learn that there are now over 1,100 accredited organisations across 52 countries and regions. We then shared lunch in the conference room, where I also introduced the team to some of the UK's national treasures, Percy Pig and Colin the Caterpillar. Shortly before leaving, I was asked to give a brief overview of King's College London and our work.

The afternoon was spent visiting the National Association for Biomedical Research (NABR) and the Foundation for Biomedical Research (FBR) in Washington, D.C. NABR is a US non-profit organisation dedicated solely to advocating public policy in support of ethical and essential animal research. FBR focuses on increasing public understanding of, and support for, the humane and responsible use of animals in medical and scientific research.

California: Caltech and City of Hope

On Thursday, I flew to California in preparation for the annual AALAS National meeting in Long Beach, CA. In recent years, AAALAC has arranged visits to local animal care and use programs during the conference week, and I was fortunate to visit both the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) and the City of Hope.

On Friday morning, I was met by the Director of the Office of Laboratory Animal Resources (OLAR) and the Facility Operations Manager for a tour of Caltech's animal facilities. Caltech has five vivariums housing 10 different species. These include rodents, zebrafish, jerboas, degu, rhesus macaques, zebra and Bengalese finches, Xenopus, jellyfish, and glass frogs. While I have been fortunate to work with a variety of species throughout my career, seeing such diversity in one institution was truly fascinating. The jerboa research team studies the science of thirst, remarkably, jerboas do not drink water and instead obtain all their hydration from their diet. Jellyfish are used to study biomimetics and deep-sea exploration.



Spot the frog (Caltech)



Jerboa

It was also wonderful to learn that many of the rhesus macaques previously used at Caltech had been successfully rehomed to sanctuaries, with photographs of them displayed throughout the vivarium. One particularly striking feature at Caltech was the strong culture of care. At the vivarium entrance, a screen displayed staff members' qualifications and achievements, alongside birthday celebrations and staff recognition.



Caltech Culture of Care corridor

Following the tour, we had lunch at The Athenaeum, where we were joined by the Associate Director of the Centre for Comparative Medicine at City of Hope, which I visited that afternoon. City of Hope has an incredible history, having been founded in 1913 by the Jewish Consumptive Relief Association to provide care for individuals with tuberculosis. Today, its research programmes span cancer, immune-oncology, stem-cell science, and therapeutics. I visited two vivariums housing rodents, alongside impressive animal imaging and non-invasive monitoring equipment, including PET/CT, MRI/PET, and ultrasound.



Hope the Mouse – providing a place for animal care staff and researchers to reflect.

After the tour, I was kindly invited to join members of the team for dinner at the clinical veterinarian's home. This was a fantastic opportunity to learn more about their work and career pathways in an informal setting.

AALAS Conference and Fellowship Reflections

On Saturday, friends and colleagues began arriving from the UK ahead of the AALAS meeting. I was fortunate to spend time with friends and visit Malibu before heading to Long Beach. On Sunday morning, I arrived at the conference centre with colleagues and began planning which talks to attend. The AALAS programme offered a broad range of subjects grouped into five main themes, making it easy to identify areas of interest. Seminars I attended included the implementation and impact of digital caging on operations, welfare, and scientific outcomes; the use of social media as a tool to build public trust in animal research; and a panel discussion on anti-science policies and misinformation. This panel explored both current outreach strategies and ideas for future engagement. It was also a great opportunity to learn more about Biomedical Research Awareness Day (BRAD), an international initiative run through Americans for Medical Progress (AMP), which closely aligns with Understanding Animal Research (UAR) in the UK.



Wednesday marked the AAALAC International Luncheon, where I and others were formally presented with our awards. It was a privilege to hear the achievements of fellow recipients, including the Global 3Rs winners.



The AAALAC International Fellowship Programme and AALAS have been truly memorable experiences. It has been incredibly valuable to learn from our American counterparts, particularly in relation to working with a broader range of species and the depth of knowledge and skill this requires. I am deeply grateful to all the institutions and individuals who generously hosted me throughout my visit and made this experience so rewarding.

Finally, a massive thank you to all the companies who arranged social events during the evenings at AALAS, it provides a great environment for networking and relaxing after a long day at the conference. The AAALAC international Fellowship wouldn't be possible without the continuous support of the sponsors, Datesand, LabDiet, Allentown LLC and In Memory of U. Kristina Stephens, MS RLATG.