The AAALAC Fellowship, or "making friends across the pond"

On the 24th of September I headed out to Washington, D.C., for what I expected would be a great couple of weeks, what I didn't expect was how quickly I would make new friends and be accepted in the America animal technology community.

Straight off the plane, taxi, hotel and then over to the AAALAC International Board of Trustees and Council on Accreditation dinner (the first time I have eaten a five course meal at 1:00 AM U.K. time). Within minutes I felt comfortable with all the people around me as they made me feel so welcome. Dr. Anne D.Y. Degryse was awarded the AAALAC International Bennett J. Cohen award and a number of colleagues spoke about her in detail. It was not only interesting to listen to how she had made an impact on science, but how the friendships had developed over the years with those speaking about her. This made me think how many of our colleagues not only make an impact on our professional lives, but also on our personal lives throughout our careers.

September 25th was a journey-recovery day which I spent rushing around Washington and seeing the sites.

The next few days were spent at a large multispecies animal facility. The people I met made my time so rewarding. The species included were mice, rats, zebra fish, ground squirrels and macaques which were involved in an extremely large number of ongoing scientific projects. Over these four days we discussed the units in the Washington, D.C., area and my unit in the U.K. and this always led to a fantastic exchange of ideas such as:

- **Automation vs. manual cage cleaning.** At the first unit I was surprised by how manual all the cage washing processes were as they processed around 9,000 cages a week. The unit I come from has a great deal of automation. This was discussed and it was very interesting to hear the views that non-automation was preferred due to the multiple types of cages being processed and that once cage processing had been completed, staff could then be allocated to other tasks. During my visit one unit did have an automated process which was processing just one type of caging.
- **Sentinel screening programs** and how efficiency is improved by taking a small amount of material from all cages on a rack and placing it into a sentinel cage rather than a weekly column screen. As some agents require close contact, I wonder how a screening program would work if mice from a rack were short-term housed with the sentinels when a study had ended.
- **Dust control.** One saying that has stuck with me is "Control Dust, Control Disease/Infection." We discussed how pathogens do not walk around the unit but move on dust and how important it is that the unit be kept clean to maintain infection and allergen control. As I walked around the unit it would have been difficult not to notice the standard of cleaning. It was excellent, particularly in heavy traffic areas (i.e., lift floors were continually being washed).
- **Animal Welfare.** Although they do not have the A(SP)A 1986 that we have in the U.K., they do have a local welfare group under the banner of the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) that provides information on best practices. This committee also develops

posters that were displayed around the campus about animals in research that the general public could see. I have always wondered why we have so many difficulties in getting posters of this type in hospitals, vet and doctors' offices in the U.K. Discussing the Ethical Review Panel (ERP) made me think how the new EU Directive and the setting up of a welfare body in all establishments will have some similarities.

- **Other areas of welfare, such as ear vs. tail biopsies** and how my unit has moved almost completely over to ear biopsies unless there is scientific justification. The use of ear tags and how if placed correctly they do not affect animal welfare was discussed, as well as companion animal policies and how animals are only singularly housed if we have scientific justification from the investigators/researcher.
- **Environmental enrichment.** I observed enriched cages as I walked around the unit. We all shared the same concerns about the effectiveness of some of the enrichment on the market and the need to look at the scientific data and trials carried out before placing them in the cages as there may be long-term detrimental effects on the animals.
- **Stocking density and the amount of working space the technicians required.** One of the units was looking at floor area for stocking density. The animals were housed in IVC cages and the more space that could be used for housing, the more mice the investigator could use and the more science could be produced. Therefore, if a changing station was not required then this space could be used for animal accommodation. The technicians I observed worked well with limited space and had developed good working practices to keep the mice clean and juggle all the equipment required (i.e., spraying of gloves, and clean and dirty segregation).
- **Training and competence.** I was hoping to observe a detailed database system on training but found, like in my unit, that competency was being recorded on paper and on excel sheets. It seems that a training database recording all forms of competency is becoming my personal "Holy Grail." The training observed was excellent and included the different induction for new scientific staff depending on the area in which they were working. It was also refreshing to hear the warning that if they did not follow the local rules then they would have their access removed (something I also remind individuals of in my induction). The amount of time taken to ensure competency, through meetings and observations, and also the sign off procedure, was extremely well documented.

There were a couple of areas that were very new to me, and one was large-scale fish work. In this area they focus on the water quality and I was amazed to see the equipment required to maintain this. The daily checks and feeding regimes were something I had never really considered and am now well educated in how involved this can be. As a genetic unit, I have always thought that we might have fish one day and after seeing this setup I understand the principles of fish work much better.

The other area involved the use of non-human primates (I had a slight confusion at the beginning as they called them "large animals"). I have always worked with mice so many apologies if some of this seems a little obvious. My first view of the macaque work was in the recovery unit. I must admit seeing macaques with a head implant made me feel a little uneasy. However, it's all about information and education, and that's what I needed. After talking to the technicians, scientific staff and from my own

personal observations, I could see that the macaques were well cared for, that the cranial caps did not seem to affect movement in the cages or play areas, and that there is a very important need for this type of research. A lot of the science was explained to me by an investigator who very obviously cared a lot about the welfare of the macaques that he had been using over the last five years.

On September 30th it was off to San Diego for the American Association for Laboratory Animal Science (AALAS) 62nd National Meeting.

October 1st was a journey-recovery day so I spent it rushing around the San Diego Zoo.

I have been to a number of IAT Congresses in the UK over the years and was warned that AALAS was a bit bigger. How about 4,500 subscribed attendees (not including turn-up-on-the-day delegates), 450+ trade show exhibits, 300+ posters, workshops, lectures, open forum discussion groups? All of this amounted to information overload. I was organised and set up my itinerary on-line before I went so I had my days mapped out and organized. But I had not included time for the trade show and posters. It actually took me four-and-a-half hours to go around the trade show, and two-and-a-half hours for the posters, and this did not include talking to everyone so the itinerary went out of the window.

Reading and re-reading this report does not really give justice to the fantastic time I had and the new friends I have made. If you are a technician reading this and feel you would like to also walk in the footsteps of past Fellows, then look out for the advert and apply. Who knows, it could be your turn next.

Finally a special thank you to all those who looked after me, showed me around your facilities, explained the science, organized social events in the evening, were brave enough to take a Brit to a baseball game (I only mentioned rounder's once), and make this such a memorable, unforgettable trip.

Thank you

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