

AAALAC Fellowship Award Experience

By: Michelle Wallace-Fields

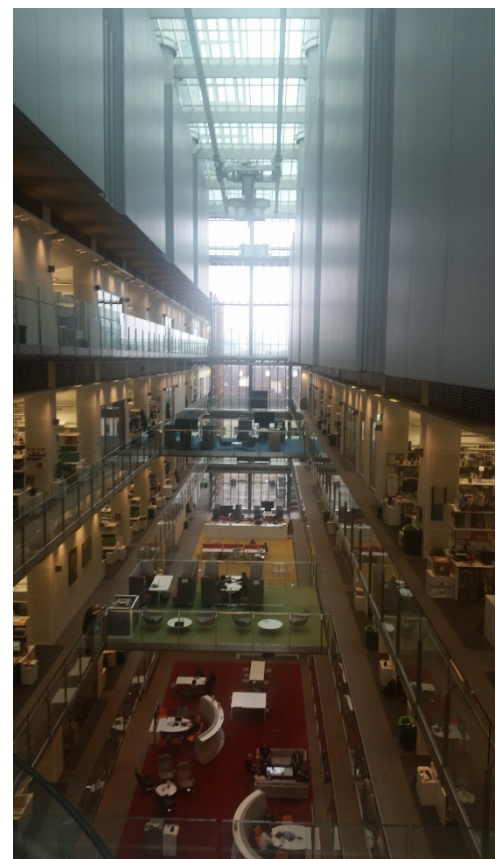
I can't tell you how honored and humbled I was to have been selected as the 2018 AALAC Fellowship Award winner. I have worked in lab animal research for 18 years and this is definitely one of the highlights of my career. The opportunity to travel overseas and be exposed to an entirely different group of people and a different regulatory system, was incredible!

There were many similarities between the U.K. and the U.S. The one that stands out the most is that all animal facility staff truly care about the health and well-being of the animals that they care for. This really cemented my belief that compassion and concern for the well-being of animals was constant, regardless of which side of the pond you came from. Another similarity was certification opportunities for technicians. The IAT (Institute of Animal Technology) Congress was very similar to National AALAS but at a smaller scale. In addition, both the IAT and AALAS promote technician certifications.

There were some differences between the U.K. and the U.S.. The first that I became immediately aware of was the openness and transparency of our field in the U.K.. They do a fantastic job with public outreach and education (more about that later). Also of note, there is not a differentiation between species, in that they do not have an organization similar to the USDA or have USDA covered species. All species are essentially "covered" by the Home Office. Staff are incredibly focused on the 3 R's (Reduce, Refine and Replace) in their everyday practices. They do not charge per diem rates or charge for tech time to assist with research. Most of the animal care staff are heavily involved with the research itself in addition to the care and well-being of the animals. While I was touring facilities, I only encountered about three members of lab staff actively working in the animal facility. The animal facility staff appeared to handle all things associated with the projects to which they were assigned. Budgets do not appear to be a hurdle that has to be overcome in the U.K.. While I am sure that they exist in some form, the animal facility staff that I interacted with had little concern for the finances involved.

My journey began in London and my first stop was the Francis Crick Institute, a very modern open-concept research facility with glass walls. (Figure 1, right). This was my first introduction to the regulatory environment in the U.K.. The rodent areas were set up very similarly to that of the U.S.. My tour was cut short so that I could attend the NC3R's (National Centre for the Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research, a U.K.-based scientific organization) award presentation. I was quite lucky to be able to attend this prestigious event. I attended five presentations from previous award winners with topics covering: liver organoids, rat behavior utilizing multi-level caging environments, mouse handling utilizing cupping or tube transfers, organs on a chip and dog welfare; training for specific behaviors. Unfortunately, I was not able to stay for the reception which announced the 2017 winner of the 3Rs prize. I would encourage a visit to their website www.nc3rs.org.uk for some great information and a great resource for your "toolbox".

My second stop was the Centre for Macaques at Porton Down, a breeding facility for rhesus macaques. I have had very limited exposure to



the use of primates in research and so this was a very rare opportunity for me to be exposed to their care and welfare. They spend a considerable amount of time habituating their macaques to people. I was even allowed to assist in this process. This was an incredible experience for me! I sat on the floor and offered them raisins and peanuts. They were a bit leery of me in the beginning, but their desire for raisins and peanuts was stronger than their fear of me. The staff were amazing and answered my endless questions and they mentioned that my enthusiasm and delight at visiting their facility was a great reminder to them about what a really amazing job they all have!

Day three was split into a visit at the Understanding Animal Research (UAR) headquarters and a visit to Kings College London. The staff at the UAR Office were incredible! They are truly dedicated to education and outreach about the use of animals in research. They visit schools, manage an excellent website which I highly recommend that everyone have in their “toolbox”

(www.understandinganimalresearch.org.uk), monitor legislation and have a plethora of videos and outreach material, all in an effort to educate the public about the role of animals in research. They launched the Concordat on Openness in May of 2014. The Concordat is a set of 4 commitments for U.K. based life science organizations to enhance their animal research communications. They currently have 120 organizations which have signed the Concordat and are committed to openness and transparency with regard to animals and research.

The second part of my day was visiting Kings College London. I spent a considerable amount of time in their zebrafish facility. This facility was massive and quite futuristic. They have Tritone robotic feeders which were mesmerizing to watch. (Figure 2 and Figure 3, above right). I learned a lot about their trials and tribulations with regard to zebrafish husbandry and welfare and I brought back many thoughts and ideas for our own zebrafish facility.

Day four included a train ride to Cambridge where I visited the MRC-Laboratory of Molecular Biology (LMB). Another fantastic group of people! I toured the facility, watched staff perform ultrasounds on mice at 9.5 days of gestation for timed pregnant studies as well as learned about microinjections. I also got to see their in-house training tracking system, which was very well done. I had a great discussion on the IAT. It was during this discussion that I started to learn about the importance of the IAT for animal technician development in the U.K. and the career pathways that are available to those technicians. There are 6 levels in the IAT career pathway, for which you can achieve diplomas. The RANTech designation occurs after completing Level 3 as an Animal Technologist. It typically takes about three years of experience to achieve this designation and is required to apply for the AAALAC Fellowship Award which is a trip to visit animal facilities in the U.S. and attendance at the National AALAS meeting.

Day five was a visit to the University of Cambridge. They have a number of animal facilities and species including aquatics, macaques, marmosets, rodents and even an aviary with native birds. (Figure 4 and Figure 5, below). I was lucky enough to be able to interact with some Marmosets. Mini-marshmallows are their favorite treat! If I had to choose just one memorable moment, this was probably my favorite!



(Figure 6, right). I was so appreciative for that opportunity to interact with them and considerate it a privilege to be allowed to do so.



Day six and seven were on my own, touring all of the “hot spots” in and around London. Including Stone Henge, Bath, Windsor Castle, Tower Bridge, Westminster Abbey and many others. (Figure 7, below).



Day eight started with a train back to Cambridge to visit the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute. The Sanger Institute has started the process of becoming AAALAC accredited. This was the first (and only) institution that I visited that was going through that process. The Sanger Institute has participated in some of the most important advances in genomic research, developing new understandings of genomes and their role in biology. They provide animals to collaborators all over the world and in doing so, want demonstrate that they abide by all standards of care for laboratory animals. They are very excited to go through the accreditation process.

My last stop on this incredible journey was attendance at the IAT Congress. The Congress was structured similarly to National AALAS. There were a number of talks and workshops, a vendor area, a poster area and many social activities to allow for networking. While at Congress, I presented a poster, gave a talk on that poster and also gave a talk on training for professional development and retention during an AAALAC sponsored session. At the end of Congress, I attended a formal Gala dinner, complete with live music. It was a perfect evening to cap off my incredible journey throughout England. I am eternally grateful to all those people who assisted me throughout this process. From creating an itinerary, which included how to get around, booking hotels and arranging tours, to all those who took the time to tour me through their facilities and guided me through the IAT Congress. I can never thank you enough for allowing me to enter your worlds for a brief moment in time. This experience has been the high-light of my professional career and I hope to pay it forward in any way that I can!