American College of Neuropsychopharmacology
bulletin







An Interview with ACNP Fellow, Jared Young, Ph.D.

Interview conducted by E. Kale Edmiston, Ph.D., ACNP Associate Member, and Giannina Descalzi, D.Phil., LGBTQIA2S+ Subcommittee Ad-Hoc Member

Q. Dr. Young, could you tell me a bit about yourself?

I'm originally from Scotland. Born in a wee small town called Prestwick, with a population of 13,000; but it's Scotland, so it has 11 pubs, and one nightclub. But I grew up in that small town, with parents that never went to university. I didn't know anyone in a scientific career, really, but when I went to university, I undertook psychology and biology, as I always wanted to understand behavior. I was originally thinking about an anthropology degree, and then I met someone that had schizophrenia, a family member of my ex-partner, and I realized that wow, better treatments are needed for people with psychiatric conditions. I therefore quickly switched to wanting to understand psychiatric conditions and conduct research to help address this massive need for better treatments. I was then lucky to complete my PhD in Edinburgh and subsequently incredibly lucky when Dr. Mark Geyer invited me to do a postdoc with him in the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). So, there I am, a wee 26-year-old flying 7,000 miles away and living in a different continent and a different country for the first time and getting to really experience a new place, and new mentorship. One of the best things about UCSD is that it is a wonderful place for cross-species translational research, and Dr. Geyer wanted me to set up cognitive assays, which I had wanted to set up for some time, so I took it and ran with. And now I'm still at UCSD, 20 years later, as a professor in my own lab and conducting cross-species translational cognitive assays with clinical colleagues and it's been wonderful. I am really glad to be working on something that may, in some way, positively impact future generations of people suffering from psychiatric conditions. It is why I'm here.

Q. When and why did you join the ACNP?

I think my first meeting was in 2008, and I have attended every meeting since. As I mentioned, I arrived in San Diego in 2006 and Dr. Mark Geyer, my postdoc mentor, was incredibly forward and constantly encouraging me to attend meetings to network and meet people, as a way to learn more about what's going on at the ground level, and so he helped me attend ACNP. I remember becoming a member of ACNP quite a while ago and failing my first attempt for membership when it was in Hawaii. That is when I realized that people that become Associate Members are amazing, often having three R01s or similar. And that's kind of what ACNP is like. Members really push you to be your best; you're like, I want to become a member, I want to help, I want to join in. And at that moment when you do become a member, it's a wonderful feeling, and then you realize that now you get to go back anytime you want and really be supportive towards this amazing community.

As to why I joined ACNP, it’s simple: ACNP is quite frankly home of the best science for psychiatric research in the world; a sentiment shared by many of my colleagues at UCSD. Since my first ACNP, I've been to many meetings, many different conferences in Europe, as well as in Australia, and across the world, and I have to say, I still agree that ACNP is the best. In fact, ACNP is such a wonderful meeting that people keep their best science in order to present it at ACNP, and attendees put their best foot forward at ACNP meetings. People go to SFN, for example, for networking and show some data, and you do get to speak to people at the ground level. But at ACNP, the best science is presented, and in my opinion, provides the best opportunities to generate new ideas and generate collegial activities. Overall, ACNP is a wonderful place to move science forward.

Q. As a member of the ACNP, have you had the opportunity to interact with innovative thought leaders in the field of neuroscience?

Yes, absolutely. I have been incredibly lucky to get involved with thought leaders in psychiatry and neuroscience. Like I said, I am here in order to help develop treatments for people with psychiatric conditions, and that's really what ACNP is all about. There is plenty of basic research, whether it be basic in humans or basic in animals, and there's plenty of clinical research being done as well. ACNP has thus given me the opportunity of meeting people that are at the edge of moving the field forward, and that is wonderful. This has given me the opportunity to explain ideas and discuss with these researchers new techniques, new opportunities, new translational assays, what might be meaningful, what is found to be impactful in a disease state, and then trying to translate that back into animals and back and forth with humans, and being able to discuss that with these leaders at ACNP is just wonderful; and all with a mind's eye to develop treatments. Yes, we're interested in new science, and yes, ACNP has new insights, but the focus is always on the patient and developing treatments for people. And that's one of the things I love most about ACNP.

Q. How has your membership in the ACNP put you in touch with the professionals who have shaped the field as it currently exists - and will enable you to be one of those who shape the various neuroscientific disciplines in the future?

One of the things that ACNP has done, which is massively appreciated, is make space available for members of the NIH. Whether it's NIMH, NIDA or NIAAA, whatever the division is, not only do the directors (when we had directors) of those divisions come to ACNP, but a lot of the Program Officers also come. At NIH, a lot of changes happen, for example changes to Biosketches, and there are people from NIH attending ACNP that will explain those changes. It also allows you to get to meet the Program Officers and develop a relationship with them. This is

super helpful, in particular in how it makes you feel as though you can reach out and email them to ask questions. These are of course things you can do without meeting them, but it's kind of hard, so having this start to a relationship is super helpful. Importantly, some Program Officers create RFS or program announcements of areas of interest that are understudied, which we wouldn't otherwise easily learn about because we don't know all the details of the portfolio of NIDA and NIAAA, etc., but then we get to hear about it because they attended ACNP and shared it with us. For example, at ACNP one time, I heard from Lois Winsky, who was my Program Officer at the time, about a program announcement that was trying to develop cross-species translational tasks with concomitant biomedical recordings, and she told many of us at ACNP about it. She had also sent out emails etc., so she tried to get as many people as she could to find out about it, but by having her attend ACNP, I got the opportunity to hear about it, talk to her about it, and begin to think about it and talk to other attendees. Thus, it is a really huge benefit to them coming to a conference and actually getting to develop a relationship with researchers, and for us all to be able to do a face-to-face meeting is very important for building up some trust and relationship. I am very grateful that ACNP opens up these sorts of opportunities. I greatly encourage ACNP to continue to foster these types of opportunities, and I greatly encourage NIH to enable scientists at NIH, like Program Officers and Directors, to continue attending these conferences and making connections with the scientists on the ground doing the work.

Q. The primary functions of the College are research and education. Do you feel the College offers investigators the opportunity for cross-disciplinary communication?

Yes, ACNP certainly helps me work across domains of interest. It is very easy when you're in a scientific setting to get really narrowly focused on the work that you're doing. Although you might be reading lots beyond it, and making all sorts of efforts to try to make sure that you expand your understanding of the many facets of importance to the disease state that you're interested in, you tend to get tunnel vision when it comes to your own research and your own techniques. But innovation comes from opening your eyes and seeing what's around you, beyond your own work, and ACNP offers you the opportunity to just that, as they invite a wide array of backgrounds of scientists. And I mean backgrounds in all senses of the word, in terms of whether it's cellular mechanisms, whether it's basic animal, basic human, all the way through to clinical research. And I love that all of them come together with the common goal of treating diseases, where we are all trying our best towards a common goal. We realize we're not always using a common language, because the language in your own field can have similarities, but not always overlap and not always be the exact same thing, but by meeting everyone in person and getting to discuss these details, we learn an awful lot more than from just reading about it. I therefore feel that one of the great opportunities that ACNP offers is for this incredibly useful cross dialogue of disciplines, and does so in a great setting and in a supportive manner.

Q. How about the opportunity to promote the application of various neuroscientific disciplines to the study of all forms of mental illness and their treatment? If so, how have these experiences helped your career?

As I mentioned earlier on, one of the things I love about ACNP is that people keep their best science. They hold it back from other conferences because they want to present it at ACNP; so, you really see everyone's best and latest data. To do this as a researcher, you need to apply early. You need to try and get a panel. It's incredibly competitive, again because everyone is holding their very best for ACNP, but there are opportunities to do so. I've had numerous exciting panels that have been accepted over the years, but I tell you, I've had a lot more that weren't accepted. But it's a wonderful opportunity to bring together scientists that aren't necessarily studying the exact same thing, but that all fit well together. For example, in 2012 or 2013, I put together a

panel on bipolar disorder, where my colleague, Dr. Arpi Minassian, a clinician, discussed her work on bipolar disorder using a cross-species behavioral task, showing behavioral differences; and Dr. Amit Anand showed that people with bipolar disorder have reduced dopamine transporter expression. We coupled this with my work, looking at mice with reduced dopamine transporter expression, and showed they have the same behavioral profile as people with bipolar disorder, and we also had a colleague looking at the cellular level, showing the latest findings investigating mechanisms of the dopamine transporter, which might lead to treatments for people with bipolar disorder. So, it was all across the spectrum from clinical, to behavioral neuroscience, to pharmacology, to positron emission tomography, and animal behaviour; we're now doing fiber photometry with those mice as well to further understand the cellular level.

Therefore, ACNP offers a great opportunity to promote not only myself or the work that my colleagues and I are doing, but really promote the ideas. Our idea here was that the dopamine transporter might be an important target, even though it doesn't turn up in GWAS; so, the idea that it's often not one gene that drives one disorder, but that there are many genes that can be altered, and that's why we're interested in polygenic risk scores now and things like that, rather than talking about single genes. ACNP really allowed that platform to exist and to help us progress through these ideas. Notably, we have since received an R01 on this work; and although I'm not saying it was directly related to ACNP, it really helps get your best ideas out there, and helps us show across different domains various demonstrations of the importance of the work. I hugely appreciate that ACNP helps us do this year after year.

Q. Anything else to say to the readers? I know you have been involved in the Diversity efforts of the College; can you tell us about that?

Well, let's face it, in the past, ACNP was always viewed as a little exclusive. It was, and it continues to be, difficult to become a member of. It's invite only. There's the best science there, and so everyone wants to be there. And I understand that ACNP limits it because they don't want a sprawling, gargantuan meeting where they have to accommodate so many, and likely lose out on focusing on such high-end research, and therefore diluting the message. I also found it hard to become a member, and didn't become an Associate Member on my first try, and frankly was surprised I got in on my 2nd. So, I understand the importance of limiting the numbers towards accomplishing the mission, we all do. But one of the things I absolutely loved in the 2020 and 2021 meetings, is that there seemed to be a sea shift of change of to ACNP, where they were showing a true recognition that there's an underlying bias, where it seems to be easier to become a member if you come from a well-known lab; it's easier if you know someone; and that's always going to be the case in every institution, in every location. But ACNP really opened up and opened up diversity invitations, allowing people that are from underrepresented backgrounds to attend ACNP. I think that initiative was wonderful, and really enhanced the diversity of science and researchers in attendance. Like I said from the start, my parents didn't have science degrees. I didn't know anything about science. I'm frankly shocked I'm even at ACNP and I'm in the role that I'm in now. Looking back, I ask myself, how did that happen? And it can happen, but part of the massive benefit was I worked with Dr. Mark Geyer. He has always been involved with ACNP, and so I got invited early on. These diversity invites therefore were fantastic, and really allowed the extension of invitations to groups that are not well represented in science, helping further the mission of the College. Indeed, 2021 in Puerto Rico was probably the most diverse meeting in the variety of ideas and people, and getting perspectives from different people of different backgrounds. I feel this is really important, because different people from different paths in life can look at things in different ways. It's not effective if we homogenize ideas. One of the dangers of AI for example, that is well documented, is when you're asking AI for research

ideas, it may come up with ideas initially, but your idea generation becomes homogenized. And we don't want that. We need variety in order to solve life's problems. We can't have everyone thinking the same way. Therefore, we can't have everyone being from the same background. And I want to emphasize 2021 was just amazing, and was followed up by an even better 2022 meeting. There really was a sea change of feelings and ideas of ACNP that meant it can become open to everyone. It really felt as though there was a difference, and I was proudly involved in some of that.

I have been part of the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee, even chairing it at one point. I was really happy to do so and feel that ACNP has been really productive. For example, a bunch of us scientists got together, and wrote a letter to ACNP sharing how some of us don't feel safe at certain locations for the annual meeting. Our letter shared how there is a reason why some communities have not attended certain meetings in the past and are underrepresented in science because they're not safe in those locations. For example, you wouldn't hold a conference in Uganda where you where there is a death penalty if you're part of the LGBT community. That would be ridiculous. So why would you go to places that are anti-LGBT, for example? And with the overthrow of Roe vs. Wade, there are states that are incredibly unsafe for junior scientists that can become pregnant. Why would they risk a miscarriage and be forced to sit in a hospital parking lot waiting for their condition to be life threatening in order to get to see a doctor? And so, we wrote how if you hold meetings in locations like that, you're excluding many people from the scientific community based on the location you choose. Remarkably, ACNP was very responsive. They created a committee to address these issues, and we identified principles and ideals; one that I'd love for them to publish our letter.

Sadly, there have been some recent steps back, and changes in laws. There has been recent suing of groups and so ACNP has stepped back from some of those initiatives, which is incredibly disappointing. I do understand it, but I'm horrified that it's happening. Although I understand it, I also feel that ACNP is the leader in the field and so I would like to see the Leader lead.

Q: You were recently awarded the Dolores Shockley Mentorship Award through ACNP. How has this honor impacted your career, and what are your thoughts about it?

First of all, I am incredibly grateful to ACNP for selecting me for the Dolores Shockley Mentorship Award. I am incredibly grateful for Dr. Kale Edmiston, who does tireless work in supporting the community, the LGBT community in particular, but underrepresented groups as a whole, throughout his career, throughout his work and his advocacy, and I'm really appreciative of him putting me forward. I was shocked that he even suggested it and so grateful that I was chosen. And he said some of the nicest things in his video. So, thank you, Kale. Thank you.

It was really nice being recognized, especially because it's really a mentorship award. The original, Dolores Shockley title was an award for the mentorship for those that are underrepresented in science, and they recently changed it to the advancement award; so again, changing words in order to fit changing narratives, and although we're trying to keep the principle the same, you lose something in there when you change titles. I am pretty sure I was nominated in part for my work in the DEI committee and also for helping establish the LGBTQIA2S+ Subcommittee. That is, I think I was recognized for pushing the envelope forward for those in communities that are underrepresented in science and that is what is being recognized by ACNP. And we're continuing to push the envelope and trying to be recognized, and thanks to our initiatives like the diversity invitations, these communities exist within ACNP, and it feels as though it is growing and there is a strength there. For example, we all had a group meeting last time, and we are always trying to have a networking session whenever ACNP rolls

around. I think getting this award, and the recognition of being a part of that, (which I am just a part, there's plenty of people that play key roles), but it is really appreciated and I'm incredibly grateful.

I've been part of the DEI Committee, which is now the EDI Action Council, at UCSD and the Department of Psychiatry since 2012. I particularly want to give a shout out to Drs. Lisa Eyler and Arpi Minassian, who really spearheaded that committee, and I learned so much from them in terms of advocating and advocacy in general. I simply wouldn't be doing anywhere near as much advocacy had I not learned so much from them. I hope they know how much I try to pay that forward, and to recognize how much I appreciate them and that really is what I feel it's about. The award is supposed to be about mentorship and advocating and that's what I try and do every day. And I hope that everyone I touch recognizes that, feels that a little, and then goes on and does it for someone else. And that's what I would love to see.