



Rita J. Valentino, Ph.D.



Christie D. Fowler, Ph.D.

## **Interview with Fellow Emeritus ACNP Member, Rita J. Valentino, Ph.D.**

**Interviewed by Christie D. Fowler, Ph.D.**

Dr. Rita Valentino has been a longstanding leader in the neuropsychopharmacology field and within ACNP. She first attended ACNP after being awarded the Mead Johnson Travel Award in 1980 as a postdoctoral fellow. Of note, this was the first year of the ACNP travel awards with only a few individuals selected. She then became an Associate Member in 1991 and regular Member in 1994. Dr. Valentino has been highly productive and impactful in advancing the field through her cutting-edge research. Among her notable contributions, her research has provided convergent evidence that CRF serves as a neurotransmitter to modulate the activity of the major brain biogenic amine systems that have been implicated in psychiatric disorders. These findings established a critical foundation for our understanding of how stress influences vulnerability to neuropsychiatric disease states. Her laboratory was also the first to demonstrate that receptors could signal and be trafficked in a sex-biased manner, which revealed important molecular underpinnings for the increased vulnerability of females to stress-related disorders. Her work on CRF led to another branch of research that was responsible for identifying neural circuits that encode signals from the bladder and coordinate central and visceral aspects of micturition, and this work has inspired others in the field of urology and the autonomic sciences. Based on these and other seminal contributions to the field, Dr. Valentino has been the recipient of many awards, including the highly prestigious 2021 NIH Director's Award for scientific leadership and vision.

Recognizing the importance of ACNP within the field, Dr. Valentino has devoted her time in service to ACNP on many committees throughout the years. Her service has also extended to higher leadership roles, including as a member of Council, Chair of the Women's Task Force, Chair of the Ethics Committee, and Secretary. Moreover, she is also well known for her exceptional mentorship of other scientists. When asked about Dr. Valentino's role as a mentor, ACNP member Dr. Debbie Bangasser responded "Rita trained me in rigorous science, such as using convergent approaches and choosing the best method to test a hypothesis. But beyond the scientific training, Rita is an exceptional role model for women in science, helping us to navigate historically male-dominated spaces, illustrating work-life balance by modeling motherhood in academia and pursuing hobbies beyond the lab, and supporting her trainees even after they've moved on. I couldn't have had a more impactful and wonderful mentor". The following interview sheds light on Dr. Valentino's unique insights and perspectives of ACNP:

***What was your position when you joined ACNP and how has your career advanced to your current position?***

I was an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Hahnemann University when I became Associate Member of ACNP, and then a Professor at the same institution in 1994 when I became a regular ACNP Member. I moved to the University of Pennsylvania in 2000, and in 2017, I became the Director of the Division of Neuroscience and Behavior at the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

***When you joined ACNP, what was your main reason for becoming a member?***

I have a neuropharmacology/neuroscience background and was doing research on the effects of stress on brain function that could underlie many psychiatric disorders. I felt that this was the best meeting and the scientific community for that combination.

***In your perspective, how has ACNP changed throughout the years?***

1. The science presented is continuously evolving as technology and concepts advance. I especially appreciate that the science does not get stale and perhaps this is a result of the regular changes in leadership and the Program Committee. I can always count on going to a panel on a topic that I am not familiar with and learning something new. There has also been flexibility in the format of the program over the years I have attended.
2. ACNP has become financially independent of big pharma. In the early days of my attendance, receptions were sponsored by Pharma, and it is good to see that is no longer the case. However, it is important to develop and maintain the scientific partnerships between academia and industry, to facilitate the translation of science to treatments. This is part of the more recent mission.
3. The meeting has grown, and the attendees and membership are more diverse. There are more junior investigators also. This adds a lot of vitality to the meeting. Although the meeting feels less intimate because of the size, the diverse perspectives enrich the social and scientific aspects of the meeting.
4. One downside is that the meeting has been programmed to fine temporal resolution, so it is difficult (especially for individuals in committees or leadership positions) to enjoy any casual social or networking time.

***Have you served in any ACNP leadership roles, and if so, what motivated you to do so?***

For me, being a member of a society means contributing in some way and also making your voice heard. I have been a member of nearly every committee including ones that no longer exist or some that were disbanded and resurrected (Animal Committee (twice), Publication Committee, Finance Committee, Program Committee, Education and Training Committee, Nominating Committee). I chaired the Ethics Committee, the Women's Task Force and served as a Council Member. I am currently serving as Secretary. I see these leadership positions in the College as another way that one can impact science, in addition to one's specific research contributions. It's incredibly rewarding to work with other ACNP colleagues that have different perspectives and problem-solving

strategies and find that we can come up with solutions to very complex issues. Working with them has been a great lesson in leadership skills.

***What do you foresee to be the main challenges for the field going forward?***

A major challenge is the growing skepticism of science by the general public. This became more prominent with the COVID-19 epidemic, but it is something that could continue to grow. There is a need for all of us to become better communicators to the public. A second challenge is how to harness the power of vast amounts of data that are being generated from all areas of research. There are challenges in storing the data, providing open access, providing training and tools so that the data can be mined, and ethical issues of management and use. We will be able to answer questions that we could not previously and generate new hypothesis by computational mining of big data sets, but there are many challenges that must be met. Finally, continuous development of the biomedical research workforce is a challenge. Concern over salaries, the many challenges of a career in biomedical research, and the enticement of careers in other sectors have led to a waning interest in the pursuit of biomedical research careers. We need to think about what the future research workforce should look like and strategies to develop that. Most importantly, we need to be good mentors.

***Looking back, what have you valued the most about being an ACNP member? What memories stand out about your experiences or your colleagues?***

I most value the colleagues I have met through meeting attendance and participation in the organization. They made my research better through mentorship, collaborations, critiques, sharing of knowledge and tools and friendship. Well, I met my husband at a meeting in Maui-that stands out! Years later, we brought our son to several meetings, and he had a blast with some other member's kids. I remember getting surprise room charges for food and pool equipment that they used. Another memory was giving a Presidential Plenary Lecture. It was such an honor to stand in front of my colleagues and give a prestigious lecture about my research. It made me realize how far I had come from the days of scrounging invitations to the meeting.

***What recommendations would you have for junior members of ACNP?***

Junior members should attend and participate in as many meetings as possible. Volunteer for committees as soon as possible and make your voice heard. Attend the receptions to network. Ask questions at sessions. Maintain the passion that got you into science in the first place and infect others with that passion.