

Report by:

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As a recipient of Autism Ontario's IMFAR travel bursary, I was privileged to attend the 8th annual International Meeting for Autism Research in Chicago, Illinois.

Having the opportunity to present a poster at IMFAR 2009 was a rewarding experience and an exciting way to end the school year. Throughout the three days of the conference, I enjoyed exploring the multitude of ASD research presented during the poster sessions, meeting other researchers and students from around the world with similar research interests, and sharing our experiences and ongoing research. One of the most enjoyable aspects of the poster sessions was the diversity of research presented. As a student researcher, I have a tendency to become self-absorbed in my specific area. Having the opportunity to explore other branches of ASD research, such as genetics, epidemiology, and clinical phenotypes reminded me of the importance of integrating research from all areas to have a better understanding of my specific research. My research interests lie in the assessment process, and the challenges and difficulties individuals and their families experience prior to and following diagnosis. I would like to make ASD research more believable, accessible, and helpful to families of children with ASD and conduct research relevant to their concerns. Attending IMFAR has broadened my knowledge and understanding of what is happening in the field of ASD internationally and will help me to achieve this goal.

I also had the opportunity to attend a variety of oral presentations throughout the conference. One of the mandates of IMFAR is to promote the exchange and assimilation of ASD research internationally and I was very pleased to attend oral presentations by researchers from Scotland, Spain, England, and Australia as well as the United States and Canada. I especially enjoyed the keynote address by Dr. Catherine Lord on what better diagnoses of ASDs would look like. Dr. Lord emphasized the importance of more efficient diagnoses and provided an overview of the proposed draft for the DSM-V. Although still a work in progress, the proposed draft could unit autistic disorders onto one spectrum called ASD and reduce the existing three domains to two, with each domain receiving a dimensional severity rating. The goal is to provide broader applicability, more explicit consideration of general behaviour difficulties, and a way to measure change in severity over time.

Attending IMFAR has further stimulated my curiosity and strengthened my motivation to continue learning and furthering my knowledge and research in the field of ASD. I am very grateful for the support provided by Autism Ontario that allowed me to attend the conference and I encourage other students involved in ASD research to attend IMFAR 2010.