

Report by:

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Many thanks to Autism Ontario and *Together for Autism* for supporting my attendance at IMFAR 2009 in Chicago. The opportunity to exchange ideas with international researchers and members of the autism community is a rare one, and is an experience I will continue to seek out in the future. The wealth of information and perspectives presented was truly remarkable. Presentation topics ranged from motor systems to mouse models, from epidemiology to environmental influences. Though I attempted to absorb as much as possible, in light of my current roles and research interests, I focused primarily on four topics: autism and mental health, family research, cultural diversity, and social skills intervention.

Several posters explored areas of autism and comorbid psychopathology, including diagnostic overlaps of autism and schizophrenia, and rates of diagnoses such as mood and anxiety disorders. Dr. Alice Carter (University of Massachusetts-Boston) and Dr. Tony Charman (University of London) presented findings on psychiatric disorders in children with autism, highlighting the complexities of diagnosing such conditions and deriving accurate prevalence estimates. As the Research Analyst for the Dual Diagnosis Program at CAMH, I prepared a poster comparing the clinical profile of our clients with and without ASD. While presenting my poster, I met with several researchers in the field of mental health, including one conducting similar analyses of psychiatric inpatients with ASD across China. This provided me with valuable insight for future research,

and established connections upon which the Dual Diagnosis Program can build in the coming years.

At a venue where much emphasis was placed on genetics, cognition and other areas of basic research, there was also a strong presence of applied research topics. Many researchers sought to explore the profound impact of an autism diagnosis on families, and to incorporate the unique perspective of family members living with autism into their studies. Several posters displayed findings on parenting stress and its association to variables including parental well-being, social support, participation in intervention activities, and child outcomes. Also, I was pleased to note an increased focus on fathers of children with autism, a previously under-investigated facet of family life in this field.

Cultural diversity in autism has been an interest of mine for many years; this topic was also well represented at IMFAR. In her presentation on the under-representation of African-American families in genetics research, Dr. Hilton (Washington University) discussed possible explanations for this trend, and practical steps researchers can take to better facilitate the inclusion of diverse participants. These suggestions included providing accommodations such as child care and transportation for single-parent families, and recruiting participants through community resources often utilized by minority ethnic groups. In addition, a project based at Georgia State University examined why African-American

children are typically given an autism diagnosis at a later age than are Caucasian children. It was hypothesized that African-American and Caucasian mothers would differ in the types of concerns they present to professionals regarding their child's development; however, no differences were found between these groups. Among other interpretations of the data, these studies perhaps raise important questions about the ways in which community professionals and researchers engage with members of minority cultural groups, and how the concerns of parents from other backgrounds may be interpreted by clinicians.

Finally, through several posters and oral presentations, I was introduced for the first time to the UCLA PEERS program, a social skills intervention designed for children and adolescents with autism. Especially intriguing are the outcomes of such interventions and predictors of success, as well as the feasibility of implementing them in naturalized settings. Dr. Ashley Dillon shared that prior social skills knowledge and autism symptom severity were

among the predictors of best outcome for the PEERS participants in her sample, whereas IQ and grade level were not. These are important data, as they can assist us in tailoring interventions to enhance social relationships for individuals across the autism spectrum. Dr. Lauren Brookman-Frazee also presented data demonstrating the success of adapting the PEERS program to a teacher-assisted intervention in a school setting, which further supports the potential for incorporating meaningful social skills instruction into educational programs for children with autism.

Attending IMFAR has allowed me to enhance my professional growth, and has given me many ideas to consider for current and future research. I have increased my confidence in networking with fellow researchers, and have begun to develop additional skills that one does not necessarily learn during more formal conference presentations. As an aspiring clinician and researcher, I truly value this chance, as well as the support of Autism Ontario in making this possible.