

NEWS

# *Spectrum* Launch: Meet the duo behind INSAR's ECR networking

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Hello, and welcome to *Spectrum* Launch. As always, we're aiming to provide guidance and resources for early-career autism researchers.

This month I spoke with **Alana McVey**, a postdoctoral scholar at the School Mental Health Assessment, Research, & Training (SMART) Center at the University of Washington in Seattle, and **Jiedi Lei**, a trainee clinical psychologist at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience at King's College London in the United Kingdom. They are chair and co-chair, respectively, of the **Student and Trainee Committee** for the International Society for Autism Research (INSAR). The committee supports the society's student members with opportunities for networking and education at INSAR's annual meetings, from a meet-the-experts lunch to a workshop on networking skills.

McVey and Lei stepped into their current roles in the summer of 2020, an unusual time in INSAR's history. The annual in-person meeting had just been **moved online** — and plans for 2021 were still up in the air.

"I felt like my mantra that year was just, 'Flexibility and patience,'" McVey says.

After another virtual meeting in 2021, the committee brought back live events in Austin, Texas, last month. McVey and Lei spoke with me about the role of the Student and Trainee Committee (STC), and their advice for early-career autism researchers more broadly.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

***Spectrum:*** How did you get involved in the INSAR Student and Trainee Committee?

**Alana McVey:** I first attended INSAR in 2014. I was working as a research assistant at the Center

for Autism Research at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. And when I was talking with the PI [principal investigator] of the study I was working on, he said, "Oh yeah, we go big for INSAR." And I was like, "OK, cool ... what's that? Let's find out!" And when I got there, it was dazzling.

Over the next few years, I benefited substantially from the Student and Trainee Committee's events. The pre-conference workshop and the meet-the-experts event were just really helpful to me in terms of supplementing my professional growth. And so then I joined as an STC member in 2017.

**Jiedi Lei:** I'm based in the U.K., and I did my master's jointly between University College London and the Yale Child Study Center. And when I was at the Child Study Center, I had the opportunity to attend INSAR. I had never been to a conference before. I really enjoyed it, and I felt like I learned a lot.

But when I was returning to the U.K. in 2017 to do my Ph.D. studies, I felt like I didn't see as many opportunities for U.K. students. I remember speaking to **Marika Coffman** [who was the STC chair at the time] and saying that I'd really love to bring on more international representation and think about how we can include more students from outside of the United States in our initiatives.

**S: Has accessibility always been a priority for the STC?**

**AM:** It's certainly been front and center in our minds. Global representation and access to education for students and trainees around the world is one of our three core goals as a committee, in addition to representing the perspectives and needs of student members and providing support through learning and networking opportunities.

**JL:** During the pandemic, when things were online, that actually provided quite a bit of opportunity for us to extend our reach a bit more globally. We were able to put on events at different times of the day that are more suitable for students and trainees in different time zones to attend. And we've also always had the **INSAR Institute** running every year anyway, which is a great event that allows people who are not able to make it to the annual meeting to at least access some of the content.

**S: As two early-career researchers, what is the biggest challenge right now?**

**AM:** This might not sound like a challenge, but one of the hardest things about being a postdoc is that there's a lot of flexible time. It's really lovely. But it also can be a bit daunting: You've been on this track in graduate school where it's like, do this and then do that and hit these milestones. And then things really open up. How am I going to spend my time today or this week or the next three months? What things are most important to me? And how does that align with the career that I want to build for myself?

And so it's been a challenge to really assume that level of independence and make those decisions for myself. Being remote makes that even more challenging: fewer people to check in with about how you're spending your time. But I think one tip is to check in with your mentor or peers, and other people, to make sure that you're really spending your time in a way that is aligned with your longer-term goals.

**JL:** It's also challenging to have this uncertainty of not knowing how things will work out. One thing I always find helpful is to just reach out to people. I think a lot of students feel quite anxious to reach out to people who are more senior — especially during the pandemic, when we haven't had as many networking opportunities. But people are normally very understanding. And I've found really great mentors just by reaching out to them via email and sharing an idea — just being a little bit brave and making that initial connection. And that's led me down some really lovely paths.

**S: Do you have any other tips for finding good mentors?**

**JL:** One of the greatest things I value in a mentor is someone who can teach me how to be a better person in some way — someone who helps you question the decisions that you make in research and clinical interventions, and who helps you figure out if that aligns with the kind of clinician and the kind of researcher you want to be. As a student, you can get bogged down in the details of meeting deadlines, and you can lose sight of the bigger picture in some ways.

**AM:** I love the way the [National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity](#) talks about mentoring. They like to debunk the myth of a 'guru mentor' — a single person who can meet all of your needs in your professional development.

So it helps to come back to what we were talking about before, with thinking about, "What are my goals? What are my needs? What do I need to get to those goals?" And then, "Who are the people who can help me meet those needs?" Oftentimes that is our primary mentor, but it may not always be. I think it's really nice to think broadly and flexibly about that.

And then you need to be able to put the rubber to the road, like Jiedi was saying, and not be afraid to reach out and ask for support: Send that follow-up email about that paper idea that you talked about, or ask that person to connect you with other people. That can be so daunting as a student. But I think the payoff is really significant when you do follow up.

**JL:** Also, don't be afraid of reaching outside of our field. One of my current supervisors works in social anxiety, but not particularly with young people with autism. And we talked about how I'm interested in looking at something that she's done in a different population, and how can we work on that together? And that kind of collaboration puts you in quite a unique position.

**S: How can interested students and trainees get involved in the STC?**

**AM:** I think the first entry point for students and trainees who want to get involved is to attend our events. Many of our events are open to students and trainees even if they are not members of the society yet, although some of our events are reserved for students and trainee members.

In terms of joining our committee, we put out a call for new members once a year, typically in September or October.

**JL:** We also recognize that it is quite expensive to attend the annual meeting and that's not always accessible to students and trainees. We've certainly had members who have joined who hadn't attended the meeting in the past but were just super excited to bring new ideas to the committee.

**S: What are you most looking forward to with the next INSAR meeting?**

**JL:** That it's in Europe! [laughs]

**AM:** I was actually going to say that as well. Not just because it means I get to travel to Europe, but because it's so hard for folks outside the U.S. to travel here for the conference. And so, when it's held in other countries, it just opens things up a bit more for them to attend.

#### **Jobs and funds:**

- The **Science & SciLifeLab Prize for Young Scientists** is open for applications. The grand prize of \$30,000 recognizes "outstanding life science research" by a young scientist who received their doctoral degree in 2020 or 2021. Applicants must submit their entry form, including an essay describing their thesis research, by 15 July.
- Neuroscientists on the job hunt can browse listings by sector, job function and location, courtesy of the Society for Neuroscience's **NeuroJobs** site.
- **Paola Arlotta**, professor of stem cell and regenerative biology at Harvard University, is hiring postdoctoral researchers and research technicians for her lab:

We are hiring Postdocs and Research Technicians!

If you are interested in developmental neurobiology, human organoid biology, and modeling of human disease, reach out via DM!

— Arlotta Lab (@ArlottaLab) **May 25, 2022**

#### **Recommended reads:**

- Only 2 percent of 178 graduate departments and institutions pay **more than a living wage** — and most pay well below that benchmark — according to research by two graduate students who compared crowdsourced data with the living wage calculator from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. And as inflation rises, those wages are being stretched even thinner. As a result, graduate school is a **tough financial challenge** for many students, as detailed by two new feature articles in *Science* and *Nature*.
- **Sebastian Choi**, a postdoctoral researcher at Harvard who plans to start his own lab at the University of Texas Southwestern in Dallas in July, shared a list of **senior postdoc seminar series** for neuroscience researchers hitting the academic job market.
- A **great scientific collaborator** is someone who is fun to work with, who will contribute to the work and shares your ambition, according to a recent *Nature* career column.
- Wedding planning may not be the first thing that comes to mind when trying to write about research, but **Steven Most**, associate professor of psychology at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, suggests giving it a try: He likens a paper's **introduction to the invitation**, the methods and results sections to the ceremony, and the discussion — where you can “unwind and chat” — to the reception.
- It is possible to succeed in academia while also **fostering inclusion and diversity** within your institution, writes Colombian researcher **Edgar Virquez**. “It was not always easy —or possible — to make headway on my advocacy as well as my research, and at times I didn’t get the balance quite right,” he writes, but having a supportive adviser helped.
- After learning that her son has a rare genetic condition, a graduate student in physics **transitioned to a career in neuroscience** — and is now working to design a device that can help him communicate his needs.
- Researchers took to Twitter with good advice for a graduate student staring down her **first peer review**.
- And an important reminder from the Academic Chatter Twitter feed:

..when I finish this paper  
..when I submit that paper  
..when I get this degree  
..when I complete this task  
..when I climb that ladder  
..when I win this award

The future is always busy. Don't forget to live now.

— Academic Chatter (@AcademicChatter) **May 27, 2022**

Any suggestions for how to make this newsletter as useful as possible, or recommendations for what topic we should cover next? Send them to [angie@spectrumnews.org](mailto:angie@spectrumnews.org).

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