



## Editors Welcome

## Grassroot efforts towards diversity in MS care and research: Win-win for patients and science



## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Fatigue

Neuronal circuits

Fatigue scores

Neuroanatomical correlate

Multiple sclerosis affects many more women than men, with a debatable increase in the proportion of women affected by the disease over the past century (Simpson et al., 2015). The sex ratio of MS care providers has also changed over the past couple of decades but the pace has been slower than expected, especially for leadership positions (Thomson et al., 2019). Along the same lines, MS has been traditionally a disease of people with North European ancestry. It is now recognized that MS affects all races, although there are limited data on incidence and prevalence in poor countries for multiple reasons including a small number of neurologists and epidemiologists, and few MRI scanners (Simpson et al., 2015). Despite those trends, there is just a small proportion of MS care providers and thought or key opinion leaders who are not of North European descent. What are we doing to bring a culture of diversity to serve an increasingly varied patient population?

The International Women in MS network was initiated to promote diversity and fairness and ultimately improve patient care (iwims-world). Although the network is now a little over one year old, it has created a vibrant momentum well worth appraisal (International Women in MS 2018; Jokubaitis et al., 2019). The group has leveraged grassroot energy along different avenues to achieve its goal of promoting women and diversity in the field of MS. There are over 300 women from over 30 countries and of all seniority levels who have joined. iWiMS website has received over 4000 visits in the past 6 months from over 50 countries. The efforts of iWiMS focus on mentoring, advocating, sharing science and training the next generation of leaders in the field.

The program includes a mentor/mentee scheme to pair junior investigators with those more senior, and a peer mentoring scheme that pairs individuals of comparable seniority, often across countries. The goal is to help junior investigators bolster their career, build confidence, and provide more senior investigators the opportunity to bounce ideas or concerns in a supportive environment. There is space to grow for all— the mentees, but also the mentors.

Advocating for diversity of gender, race and age, involves partnership with scientific organizations in the field of MS to promote balance at all levels, from scientific programs to executive committee membership. Raising awareness encourages novel ideas when inviting speakers, program chairs or committee members as it takes significant

effort to overcome unconscious biases and consider broadly the available talents and expertise of good candidates. These partnerships have started to bear fruits and the gender and age balance of invited speakers and chairs at key MS or neuroimmunology meetings has shifted. This greater variety sends positive signals to junior investigators, especially those from under-recognized countries.

The iWiMS network has set up 12 scientific interest sub-groups, led by a combination of junior and geographically diverse investigators (examples include neuro-ophthalmology, epidemiology, genetics, biomarkers etc.). Each group sets up quarterly hour-long web-based scientific programs with 2–3 invited speakers. Between 15 and 25 participants from 5–10 countries join these presentations that allow meaningful scientific discussions. They provide opportunities for collaboration, especially involving the more junior investigators and those from countries where the development of research projects is challenging. These one-hour programs enable investigators with financial or family constraints that preclude travel to engage actively in science and allow junior investigators to share ideas with international experts. Participants in these programs select specific sessions, and are likely to be more actively engaged in discussions. This is in contrast to large audiences in yearly international conventions who answer their emails or read newspapers during talks that are not of interest. Furthermore, such web-based scientific meetings provide a greener and more sustainable option to share science and promote junior investigators than large yearly in-person meetings (Gerhards).

Leadership training is another axis of support provided by iWiMS. The training can be informal, for example by including junior investigators in leadership positions (leads of scientific sub-groups, members of the executive committee, speakers during web-based programs). More formal free web-based leadership education provides additional interactions. The iWiMS network is making deliberate efforts to reach out to investigators working in under-represented regions of the world, to give them a chance to be part of this community.

The success of iWiMS's approach should prompt a rethink of how we currently perform, share science and ultimately deliver care to our patients. Should scientific exchanges mostly occur at large yearly conventions that have substantial financial, time and environmental burdens? Short scientific meetings that are free and do not require travel

(or time change) are not only greener but also more affordable to those who either do not have the finances or the time to travel, like parents with young children or those who care for ill family members (Gerhards, blog). Furthermore, engaging in short web-based scientific meetings that occur all year long is conducive to stronger science sharing and collaborations.

The refreshing enthusiasm of the iWiMS network for its various activities is a measure of its success. The number of volunteers who have engaged in these activities is a testament to the unmet need. There is a compelling argument to involve younger generations in science, and for this, we should implement all modern tools to promote diversity and foster all available talents that might ultimately cure MS.

## References

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