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JDVAC 2019: Audiology Round-Up!

This year's annual Joint Defense Veterans Audiology Conference (JDVAC) was held from February 4 to 6, 2019 at the Gaylord Texan Resort and Convention Center. The conference theme was Audiology Round-Up, and it surely lived up to the name. Our attendance was the highest ever since the conference inception in 2009. Keynote speakers presented on a wide variety of topics encompassing all aspects of the audiology scope of practice. Topics ranged from diagnostics to conservation to rehabilitation. In addition to the fantastic audiologists that presented, we were fortunate to have Anthony Tolisano, M.D., a military otolaryngologist, present on MRI and asymmetric hearing loss as well as participate in a joint presentation with Angela Shoup, Ph.D. that educated the attendees on the collaborative care between audiology and otolaryngology. It was interesting and exciting to see the follow-up on patients that are referred for medical intervention. The keynote speakers were not the only ones bringing their knowledge and research to the group. A wonderful variety of field presentations and poster sessions provided more opportunities to expand our expertise. Thank you to all of you that contributed and we are hopeful you will continue to submit your research.

None of this would be possible without the support of our exhibitors. The vendor hall, while more than a few steps away from the sessions, was none the less a big draw for the group (and not just because that is where the food was). The exhibitors all gave very positive feedback and stated they felt they had great opportunities for interaction with everyone. Apps and Innovations, our vendor/participant social event, was a great success. This year we tried a slightly different "speed dating" format to encourage good dialog and participation. For each vendor visited the participant received a ticket and the opportunity to win one of two grand prizes. The prizes this year were Sony Bluetooth Noise Cancelling headphones. Congratulations to our two winners!

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank those who participated on the education committee for their tireless efforts to make this the amazing conference that it was. I am so grateful to all of you for you giving your time and energy to the planning, I could not have done it without you.

If you would like to volunteer for the JDVAC 2020 Education committee please send your information to Michele Gortemaker (michele.gortemaker@va.gov) next year's conference program chair.

Erica Dombrowsky, AuD



Member Spotlight: Nicholas J. Liimatta, Au.D.

1. How did you decide to become an Audiologist?

Like a lot of audiologists, I stumbled upon audiology via speech-language pathology. Both of my brothers had speech difficulties growing up and after regular speech therapy from their school SLPs, they improved significantly. I always thought that was pretty impressive, so I took an introductory Communicative Disorders class when I was a sophomore in college to learn more about the field. Being aware of the Communicative Disorders department led me to a hearing science course. After taking hearing science, I definitively knew I had a genuine interest in pursuing audiology. The combination of personal interaction with patients, science and technology in the profession appealed to me.

2. Please share with me your VA journey.

Between being a student and a professional, I have worked at VAs in the following five cities: Portland (OR), Madison, Pittsburgh, Grand Rapids, and Milwaukee. Initially, I applied for a few T35 grant research traineeship positions in grad school and accepted a summer-long position at the NCRAR at the Portland VA. That was my first experience with the VA, and it certainly left quite an impression on me. What a terrific group of researchers! They are dedicated not just to research, but translational research that can positively impact veterans. After working with them for a summer, I had my fall semester clinical placement at the Madison VA (I attended the University of Wisconsin Au.D. program). It was enlightening to work on the clinical side and see what the day-to-day life of a VA clinical audiologist looks like. While I was a little surprised how busy it was and how quickly things moved, I was again able to work with a terrific group of audiologists that loved what they did and displayed great passion for their work. Those busy days went quickly thanks to the people with whom I worked (both audiologists and patients) and having the sense that what was happening in the clinic was very meaningful. For my externship, I was determined to be at a VA site because I knew that is where I wanted to work in the future. I expected a VA externship to be a beneficial step in that goal of becoming a VA audiologist. I was very fortunate to be accepted at the Pittsburgh VA for my externship, and again found myself among outstanding audiologists who really cared about doing the best job possible for veterans. Working there under the supervision of that group of audiologists for a year was far and away the most important part of my audiology journey that helped shape my clinical skills and efficiency. It fully prepared me for a professional audiologist position. Those first three VA experiences as an Au.D. student showed me that if I continue with a career as a VA audiologist, I will likely work with caring, effective, and dedicated colleagues that try to improve the lives of veterans that have sacrificed so much for us. I applied only to VAs for my first job as an audiologist and was hoping to be as close to my hometown of Milwaukee as possible because most of my family resides in the area. I was able to accept a position a reasonable distance from home at the VA CBOC in Grand Rapids, MI. I again worked with a wonderful group there and it was everything I hoped my job would be. After working there for about a year, I noticed a vacancy at the Milwaukee VA. Even though I truly loved the Grand Rapids VA position and the life I had in that city, I knew I could not pass up an opportunity to work in my hometown. I have had a rewarding job with a great group at the Milwaukee VA for almost six years now and I do not plan on leaving any time soon. All my VA experiences have shown me that while individual VA facilities can do certain things a little differently, all of them have the commonality of being full of dedicated people who are doing whatever they can to improve lives of veterans.

3. Please elaborate on your clinic. What services do you provide?

The Milwaukee VA audiology clinic has five full-time audiologists, one part-time audiologist, and two health technicians. We have four sound booths, three fitting rooms (that also serve as audiologist offices), and one health technician patient room. We do comprehensive hearing evaluations (including compensation and pension evaluations), hearing aid evaluations, hearing aid fittings, hearing aid follow ups (checks, repairs, adjustments, modifications), and work with accessories and FM/Roger systems. One of our audiologists and two behavioral psychologists run a modified Progressive Tinnitus Management workshop. A couple years ago we had an otologist join our ENT department part time, and he performs Baha surgeries, so we have been able to increase our number of Baha patients. As far as other services go, we are limited by the physical space available in our clinic so we cannot add any other audiology specialty services at this time. However, we are able to make arrangements for patients that have needs for other services.

4. Why do you enjoy working as a VA audiologist or working with vets ?

I enjoy working at the VA for many reasons. I think dedicating time and effort to helping veterans is an extremely worthwhile and rewarding way to spend a career. Hearing/communication plays an important role in quality of life, and if I can play a role in helping veterans in that capacity, I am proud to do so. Veteran patients are also great to work with – they are mostly very pleasant and engaged, but also have unique challenges. VA coworkers are another main reason I have enjoyed my VA positions. Throughout my VA experiences, my various supervisors and coworkers have consistently been incredible as they genuinely enjoy supporting the VA's mission. They come to work because of their passion for our veterans. I also love being a VA audiologist because I view it as being a very pure version of being an audiologist. A veteran's possible financial limitations are not a factor limiting them from getting the best hearing care they need. Thanks to the expansive VA contract, we also have access to the most advanced hearing aids and accessories on the market. At the VA, we are in a unique situation to provide our patients with the best possible hearing aids and/or devices warranted for their unique situation without being hampered by costs. The VA culture of following evidence-based practice assures the best possible care for our patients.

5. What changes do see in VA Audiology in the next 10-20 years?

I think one of the most prominent changes in VA audiology will be the growth of remote clinic diagnostics and treatment. This will especially have an impact at the VA, where a lot of patients have to travel a great distance to receive services (unless they opt to utilize outside care based on the Mission Act). The VA has made drastic progress with teleaudiology. The development of remote programming features from various hearing aid manufacturers will certainly supplement VA teleaudiology initiatives. In the future, I hope to see a more firm national directive regarding hearing aids lost outside of the loss and damage replacement warranty. It seems like every clinic has a different protocol, so veterans that receive care at different VA audiology departments may wind up seeing conflicting policies. Additionally, I hope the VA commissions an update to the landmark 2005 study regarding the effects of military noise exposure on hearing loss and tinnitus, given there has been further research on the topic since that was published. I would also like an update to the audiology handbook for compensation and pension evaluations to improve consistency of opinions between different audiologists. Generally, while I love working for the VA, there are opportunities for improved uniformity across hospitals.

6. What advice would you give new Audiologists just entering the field?

I recommend that they do not get complacent. We work with a lot of changing products and technology in our field. Part of our job is to be diligent in learning updates and being comfortable with everything that is currently available. We have resources available to stay updated, so we should utilize them. Also, in their early years of working, they will find their rhythm as clinicians, but they should always self-evaluate and think about how they can improve.

7. What are your favorite JDVAC convention memories?

I attended JDVAC for the first time in Dallas as a student volunteer during my externship year. That was overall my most memorable JDVAC experience. I would not be able to pinpoint one specific memory I liked the most, but the conference generally left quite the impression on me. At previous conferences I attended, I would always be able to find talks that I had interest in, but JDVAC was something else entirely. It was so amazing seeing talks and poster presentations that were all geared towards VA/DoD relevant topics of interest – it was basically tailor-made for issues about which I wanted to learn. Subsequent JDVACs were still great for that reason, with the added benefit of catching up with audiology friends from across the country that I have met throughout the years. I suppose that is the beauty of JDVAC – attendees get information VA/DoD audiologists want to know while also getting to see familiar faces.