

Interview with Aimee McRae-Clark, Pharm.D., BCPP

Dr. Aimee McRae-Clark is an Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston, South Carolina. Her clinical and research expertise is in substance use disorders, pharmacotherapy, and dual diagnoses. Aside from educating students, Dr. McRae-Clark is involved in grant-funded research as well as producing numerous publications. The following interview provides insight into Dr. McRae-Clark's practice, as well as advice on research, to help pharmacists generate ideas on how substance abuse and dependence might be integrated into their practice.

HOW DID YOU BECOME INTERESTED IN SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS?

As a Pharm.D. student, I had the opportunity to do a rotation on an inpatient substance use unit. By specializing in substance use disorders, I felt that my pharmacy background would be ideal not only in developing a better understanding of the effects of illicit drugs, but also for developing potential treatments in this area.

HOW DID YOU GET TO WHERE YOU ARE TODAY? WHAT IS YOUR BACKGROUND/TRAINING?

I received my BS in pharmacy from the University of Georgia and completed my post-baccalaureate Pharm.D. at the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC). I continued at MUSC to complete a residency in psychopharmacy practice and a two-year National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) research fellowship. I was fortunate to then be awarded a K23 Mentored Career Development Award from NIDA, which provided support and resources for five additional years of focused training in drug abuse research.

PLEASE DESCRIBE YOUR DAY-TO-DAY ACTIVITIES.

I spend most of my time overseeing ongoing research projects, writing manuscripts, and developing new grant submissions. I am also actively involved in teaching and mentoring junior faculty.

WHAT ROLES CAN PHARMACISTS ASSUME IN RESEARCH? COULD YOU GIVE AN EXAMPLE OF A PROJECT YOU WORKED ON AND THE LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT?

Pharmacists can play a variety of roles in research. I have served as Principal Investigator (PI) on several NIH-funded grants. I have also participated as a co-investigator on multiple additional projects, providing guidance on medication dosage, drug interactions, and

regulatory requirements (such as obtaining INDs from the FDA). I work with a multidisciplinary team with complementary areas of expertise. For example, my co-investigators typically include addiction psychiatrists, a physician assistant, clinical psychologists, and statisticians.

WHAT PROJECTS ARE YOU WORKING ON CURRENTLY?

I am currently PI of an R01 from NIDA evaluating the efficacy of bupirone in conjunction with contingency management and motivational enhancement therapy for the treatment of marijuana dependence. I am also co-PI of a component of a large center grant focused on women's health; our component is utilizing a pharmacological stressor to explore gender differences in cocaine craving. I am also involved in a multisite medication treatment trial for cocaine dependence, as well as several other clinical laboratory studies.

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR MOST FAVORITE PROJECT IN THE PAST AND WHY?

My current R01 is by far my favorite project to date. The project includes pharmacogenetic analyses to determine if treatment outcome can be predicted, and also incorporates a novel assay for medication compliance. I feel that my expertise as a clinical pharmacist was instrumental in developing the methodology, and was also a major factor in my receiving the grant.

HOW CAN A PHARMACIST BECOME INVOLVED WITH RESEARCH?

The NIH website is a great place to start to find funding opportunities. Also, the CPNP research committee is actively working to compile information on research training opportunities to help members interested in getting involved in research.

WHAT ARE GOOD RESOURCES PHARMACISTS CAN USE TO BECOME MORE EDUCATED ABOUT SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS?

Good resources include the National Institute on Drug Abuse website (www.nih.nida.gov) for information on new research findings and upcoming conferences, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration website (<http://www.samhsa.gov/treatment/>) for statistics, treatment options, and reports.

WITH ALL YOUR PUBLICATIONS THUS FAR, WHAT HAVE YOU FOUND WORKS BEST FOR YOU WHEN WRITING? DO YOU WORK ON SEVERAL DIFFERENT MANUSCRIPTS AT ONCE? WHERE DO YOU FIND TIME TO WRITE? WHAT IS THE BEST STRATEGY FOR WRITING?

I find it best to have several manuscripts in different “stages” of development. For example, at the moment, I have a manuscript that is being reviewed by a journal, another that I am completing writing the discussion, and a third for which the analysis is currently in progress. I try to “block” one morning or afternoon a week to devote to writing, although my schedule does not always cooperate.

HOW HAVE YOU FOUND PEOPLE TO COLLABORATE WITH ON PROJECTS?

When I have a new idea for a project, I will often discuss it with my previous collaborators, and ask for advice on other individuals who may have the expertise needed for that particular project. I also find attending annual meetings, and particularly attending poster sessions, are great opportunities to meet and talk with researchers with similar interests and potentially start new collaborations.

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