

ART AUTISM RESEARCH TRAINING Program

NEWSLETTER

Volume 2, Issue 1

August 24, 2009

MESSAGE FROM THE PROGRAM DIRECTOR

We are delighted to send you this new edition of the ART newsletter at a time where our training program takes new momentum.

We have just recruited the sixth and last generation of our first cycle of funding and have exceeded our initial target of attracting 50 students from Canadian universities to autism research. More importantly, in a very competitive renewal we have been successful at continuing this training program for another cycle of funding from 2010-2015. The level of funding by CIHR has increased, and with more universities being involved, we have been able to leverage in-kind contributions by multiple universities which will give a total budget exceeding \$2.5 million over the next cycle.

A critical partnership has been formed with the Sinneave Family Foundation from Alberta, a foundation which is aiming at supporting autism research in an emerging academic team in Alberta, and the partnership with ART will allow

them to develop research capacity from Calgary to Edmonton and will in turn expand the impact of ART in Canada.

We are also making significant efforts in the next cycle of funding to attract international students and we have a specific initiative to open up, in partnership with Autism Speaks, a number of free slots to our Summer School Program for trainees or fellows from Latin American countries, something which will start in the summer 2009.

Finally, we are also developing partnerships with a Centre of Excellence application for the study of neurodevelopment, which is bridging various research activities from western to eastern Canada, and will study, alongside autism, other important childhood disorders such as cerebral palsy and fetal alcohol syndrome, in an effort to better understand atypical brain development. Our partnership with this neurodevelopmental network, led by Dan Goldowitz, will leverage ART capacity and create syner-

gic opportunities for trainees.

On the administrative side, I want to thank all of the Faculty for their contributions, which was critical in the success of our first 6 years. With new faculty members joining in, we will have an enriched group of mentors which can only be a benefit to the new cohorts of trainees.

The running of the ART program has been remarkably well organized thanks to the efforts of Rita Zakarian first, followed by Annie Coulter, who was replaced for 1 year by Liliana Abruzzese. Annie is now back with us, and I want to take this opportunity to thank all of them for the incredible commitment and support they have shown over the years. Welcome to the Summer School 2009!



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ART is sponsored by:



PROGRAM RENEWAL

The first 6 years of the ART Program have been a resounding success! By August 2009, after 6 years of recruitment, 56 trainees have been admitted into the Program (6 Master's, 32 PhD, and 18 Post-Doctoral / MD fellows). Forty-two of these 56 trainees were funded by ART and 14 by alternate sources.

Renewal Funding

In April 2008, the Program submitted a letter of intent to CIHR for the next round of funding, 2010-2015. ART was then invited to submit a full application which was approved in April 2009, with full funding, amounting to \$1,950,000 (\$325,000 / year). ART was also able to secure various in-kind contributions from partner universities, including McGill University—which has committed to contribute funds towards the cost of an administrative coordinator, the equivalent of

0.5 FTE—and the Sinneave Family Foundation, totaling a minimum of \$675,000 over the 6 year cycle.

New Partnerships

In addition to the 9 original universities (University of Alberta, University of British Columbia, Dalhousie University, Université Laval, McGill University, McMaster University, Université de Montréal, Simon Fraser University, and University of Toronto), 5 new universities have joined as partners. They are: University of Calgary, University of Ottawa, Queens University, University of Victoria, and University of Western Ontario.

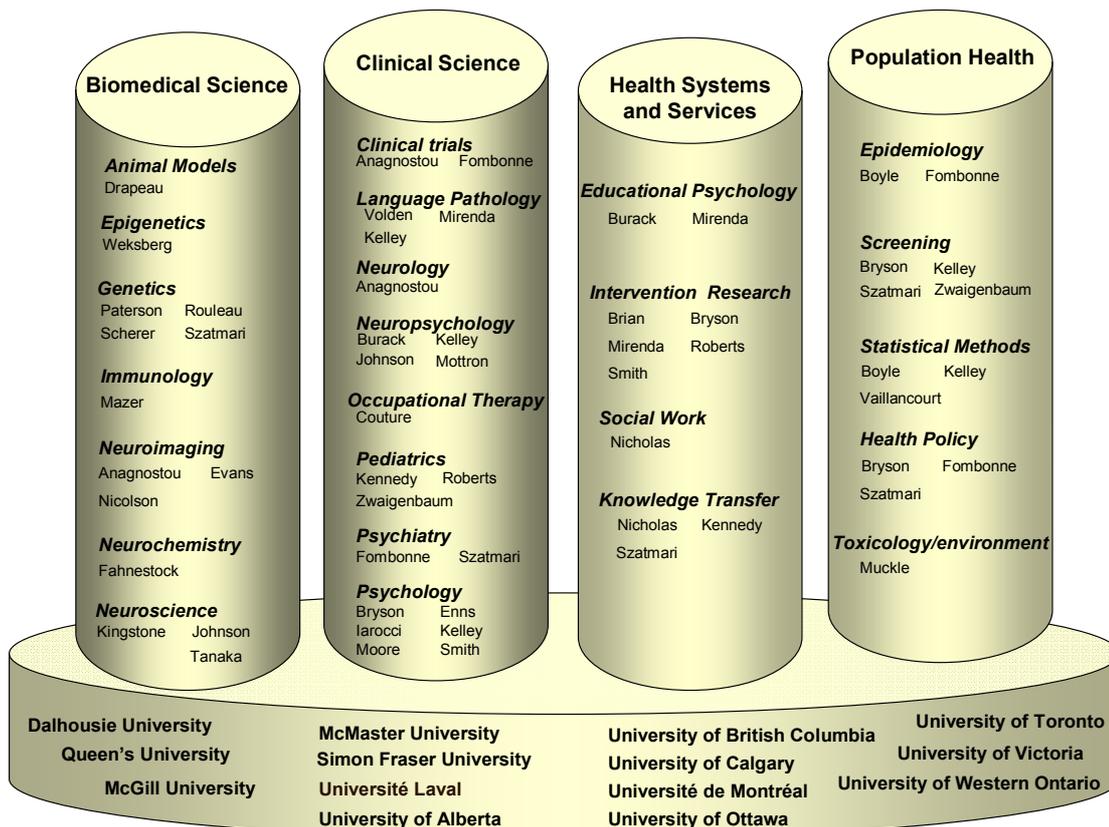
New ART Faculty

New mentors have also been added to the ART Faculty, further broadening the Program's multidisciplinary and geographic repre-

sentation. In addition to the previous group of 23 Mentors (minus two), they are: **Dr. Evdokia Anagnostou** (neurology, U of T), **Dr. Jessica Brian** (clinical-developmental psychology, U of T), **Dr. Mélanie Couture** (occupational therapy, U Laval—see "FOCUS" on page 3), **Dr. Pierre Drapeau** (animal models, U de M), **Dr. Shannon Johnson** (clinical neuropsychology, Dalhousie), **Dr. Elizabeth Kelley** (psychology and language pathology, Queens), **Dr. Tara Kennedy** (developmental pediatrics, U of T), **Dr. Gina Muckle** (toxicology, U Laval), **Dr. Rob Nicholson** (neuroimaging, UWO), **Dr. David Nicholas** (social work, U of Calgary), **Dr. James Tanaka** (cognitive psychology, U of Vic), **Dr. Tracy Vaillancourt** (psychology and statistical methods, U of Ottawa) (see "Transdisciplinarity..." figure).

For Faculty profiles and research interests, visit the ART Website under "Faculty".

TRANSDISCIPLINARITY OF THE ART PROGRAM



FOCUS: Mélanie Couture, PhD - From Trainee to Mentor

In the Spring of 2008 I became a grown up! When I went to bed on March 31st I was a post-doc trainee at McGill University, and when I woke up the following morning I had become an Assistant Professor at Laval University. The transition went smoothly, as I had received very good training with Drs Fombonne and Gisel. I had been very lucky to be involved in two amazing CIHR training programs. The Canadian Child Health Clinician Scientist Program, designed to specifically train health care professionals in pediatrics, and the ART Program. Both programs were very useful in helping me prepare for this transition to independent researcher. The ART program has been an amazing experience! I first became involved in autism

research during my post-doc, having completed a PhD in biomedical sciences with a focus on prematurity and neurodevelopment problems. The ART Summer school was excellent in introducing me to the most up-to-date research in autism in addition to the most renowned researchers in this field in Canada. The traveling opportunities were fantastic. Being able to participate in the IMFAR conferences every year was very important in maintaining my interest in the field and supporting my ideas for future research. I also managed to visit a few labs around the country, those of Drs Livingstone, Iarocci and Mirenda in Vancouver. ART mostly introduced me to amazing people, and allowed me to create great contacts in which potential

collaborations are emerging; a paper with Dr Mirenda on the Sensory Profile, another on imitation and motor skills with Dr Smith, a new infant project might emerge with Drs Bryson, Brian and Zwaigenbaum. I cannot thank Dr Fombonne and the Steering Committee enough for allowing me to become a trainee and most wonderfully a Mentor in this program. It is quite an honor to be on the list of Mentors for the ART program! Many thanks once again.



NEW ART PROGRAM FEATURES

Biennial Winter Institute

The Winter Institute will serve as another opportunity for trainees and mentors to meet in person to discuss their projects, as well as recent and relevant research findings. In conjunction with CAIRN, and supported by the Sinneave Family Foundation, a 4-day event will be organized every two years, comprising of two overlapping events:

- a two-day workshop for trainees and mentors – this will include informal presentations by mentors and trainees, and discussions about key research issues, “hot topics”, and controversial hypotheses. There will also be one keynote lecture by an ART faculty or a distinguished guest.
- a two-day Canadian conference on autism – this event will be open to a broader community of professionals and researchers. It will target policy makers, representatives of provincial autism

advocacy associations and Autism Society Canada, academics outside the ART Program, and health-care professionals who are directly involved in the delivery of services to persons with autism.

Knowledge Translation Journal Digest

This will be a great knowledge translation activity for Year 2 & 3 trainees, in which they will summarize the main research findings of 2-3 recent articles per year, selected by themselves and their mentors. This compilation of plain language summaries will be posted on the ART website and disseminated to a broader audience, through mechanisms such as CAIRN and existing provincial and national newsletters.

Knowledge Dissemination Activities

As part of the successful completion of the training, Year 2 & 3 trainees will participate in at least one presen-

tation of autism research evidence to a lay audience (e.g., teacher association). This will not be confined to the trainees’ own research results but rather will represent their broader knowledge base. This will be facilitated by a common set of slides for trainees to adapt and use in their presentations. This activity will be supervised by the trainees’ mentors.

Summer School for the Pan American Autism Training Initiative (PAATI)

This initiative is offered in conjunction with *Autism Speaks*, which is leading the PAATI, in partnership with CIHR, the Mexican Carso Health Institute and the NIH. ART is making 4 spots available at the summer school every year for Latin American graduate students and post-doctoral fellows. This year we welcome Cristiane de Paula from Brazil, and Liliana Plumeda from Mexico!

NEW FUNDING INITIATIVES

Travel Stipends

For the new round of CIHR funding, travel stipends will increase to \$1,250 / year for trainees' 2nd and 3rd years (i.e. a total of \$2,500 in travel funding over the course of a three-year-track trainee's time in the Program). The increase will start in 2010, and will be for the current Year 2 trainees' last year, and the current Year 1 trainees' 2nd and 3rd years. One-year-track trainees, don't forget that you too receive one year of travel funding.

Summer Students Program

Summer students from undergraduate programs at partner universities will be encouraged to engage in research activities in the labs of ART faculty. These students will be funded at CIHR rates.

Recruitment Travel Stipends

New to the Program are recruitment travel stipends, to be used by national and international students who wish to complete their studies with one of the research teams attached to ART. The stipend will allow students to travel to or within Canada to meet with their prospective mentor's team, become acquainted with the research environment, and complete a proposal with their mentor. It is expected that applicants will then register at a Canadian university to complete a degree and apply for full training in the three-year ART Program.

PROGRAM ADVISORY COMMITTEE (PAC)

Program Advisory Committee (PAC) Members:

| | |
|------------------------|----------------|
| Dr. Eric Fombonne | (2004-present) |
| Dr. Pat Miranda | (2007-present) |
| Dr. Wendy Roberts | (2006-present) |
| Dr. Steven Scherer | (2004-present) |
| Dr. Joanne Volden | (2006-present) |
| Dr. Lonnie Zwaigenbaum | (2007-present) |
| Ms. Patricia Murray* | (2007-present) |
| Mr. Nick Katalifos* | (2007-present) |

*representatives from the community

Representing Trainees:

| | |
|--------------|----------------|
| Carley Piatt | (2009-present) |
|--------------|----------------|

Trainee Representative

As we say goodbye to Shane Lynch, who did a great job serving as Trainee Representative for his last 2 years in the Program, we welcome Carley Piatt, a PhD student at the University of Alberta. The Trainee Rep's mandate is to represent the trainees on the Program Advisory Committee (PAC), as well as organize certain activities at the Summer School and IMFAR. Carley will also take on the challenge of creating a bank of slides for trainees to use when giving autism-related talks.



ART SUMMER SCHOOL 2009—CURRICULUM

Main topics for 1st year trainees:

| | |
|------------------------|--------------------|
| Intro to ASD | Dr. L. Zwaigenbaum |
| Clinical Illustrations | Dr. M. Steiman |
| Epidemiology | Dr. E. Fombonne |
| Language Development | Dr. J. Volden |
| Assessment | Dr. I. Smith |
| Neuropsychology | Dr. S. Johnson |
| Intervention | Dr. P. Miranda |
| Genetics | Dr. S. Scherer |
| Outcome Studies | Dr. E. Kelley |
| Neurology | Dr. W. Roberts |
| Neuroimaging | Dr. E. Anagnostou |
| Social Understanding | Dr. C. Moore |

Advanced topics for 2nd and 3rd year trainees:

| | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| Libraries / Databases | Ms. L. Sikora |
| Research in Early Detection | Dr. L. Zwaigenbaum |
| Statistical Methods | Dr. T. Vaillancourt |
| PRT-based Intervention | Dr. I. Smith |
| Psychophysiology | Dr. S. Johnson |
| Knowledge Transfer | Dr. D. Nicholas |
| Parenting a Child with ASD | Dr. D. Nicholas |
| Optimal Outcomes | Dr. E. Kelley |
| Animal Models | Dr. P. Drapeau |
| RCT / Psychopharmacology | Dr. E. Anagnostou |
| Gaze following | Dr. C. Moore |
| Social Understanding | Dr. C. Moore |

IMPORTANT DATES & EVENTS

Aug 24-28, 2009 ART Summer School

Held at Le Meridien-Versailles in Montreal, QC.

Oct 2, 2009 CAIRN Conference

The Canadian Autism Intervention Research Network (CAIRN) is holding its 5th conference on October 2nd, 2009, at the Toronto Airport Marriott Hotel. The main conference objective is to work towards an updated consensus on research priorities in ASD, and will include the families of people with ASD, politicians, researchers and students. Previous CAIRN conferences led to the development of the *Pathways in ASD* project. ART has chosen 4 trainees to send to this conference: Jillian Filliter, Steve Gentes, Carley Piatt, and Sharon Smile.

Nov 6, 2009 Deadline to submit posters for IMFAR 2010

May 20-22, 2010 IMFAR 2010 Philadelphia

The 9th Annual International Meeting for Autism Research (IMFAR) will be held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA, May 20-22, 2010 at the Philadelphia Marriott Downtown. ART will be holding its annual international speaker event either the evening of the 19th or the 22nd. More information to come...

Go to <http://www.autism-insar.org/> for more information about IMFAR

For more information about ART contact:

Annie Coulter
Program Coordinator
Montreal Children's Hospital
4018 Ste-Catherine Street West
Room K-205A
Montreal, Quebec
H3Z 1P2 Canada

W: (514) 412-4400 ext. 23502
F: (514) 412-4346

E-Mail:

annie.coulter@muhc.mcgill.ca

WEB:

www.traininautism.com

ART SUMMER PROGRAM:

What are trainees saying?

"The overall quality and attitude and supportiveness of all of the lecturers were exemplary. Thank you to all for their attention and time & support and expertise"

"All of the content was excellent and provided both enough background and enough detail on current research to be interesting and engaging throughout."

"Most speakers adapted their presentations to the blend of experiences and knowledge of the students. This was appreciated. Summer school provided an overview of research and was supportive of a commitment to seeing the big picture of ASD and research initiatives. All lecturers were approachable"

"This week was absolutely amazing! I learned so much new information on ASD that is highly relevant for my research and my clinical work. Thanks so much for the outstanding organization of this superb program"

"I thought the program was excellent. I learned a great amount of value and all the instructors were very enthusiastic about their subjects and helped us trainees"

"This is a great program. I have discussed with a few trainees and we all feel this program has played both a key and essential role in our training as young autism researchers"

"I think second year was great. The focus seemed to be less intensive in terms of research but more about real life as a clinical researcher and more

philosophical ideas. I think this year really taught me about how to deal w/ grants/post docs/media/ethics and I found this extremely informative and relevant. I am very grateful for this opportunity and for the existence of this program"

"Very good balance between learning new information for lecturers yet being able to interact and implement personal comments or ideas"

"The breadth of training was the most valuable. I was able to hear experts in different but inter-related areas and gain a broader knowledge base. I learned some things in other fields that are relevant to my area that I would not have otherwise learned about."