Former Fellow Follow-Up with Dr. Mengying Li, Staff Scientist

Mengying Li, PhD, is a staff scientist at the National Cancer Institute, where she supports epidemiological research on lung cancer and melanoma. Dr. Li completed her postdoctoral fellowship from 2017 to 2020 at NICHD with Dr. Cuilin Zhang. During her postdoctoral studies, Dr. Li investigated the risk factors and short- and long-term consequences of gestational diabetes for women and their children.

Check out our Q&A with Dr. Li to learn more about her career path in epidemiology, how she transitioned into being a staff scientist, and what it is like to work in such a position!

Where did your interest in epidemiological research come from? I decided to pursue a medical education, which starts at the undergraduate level in China. As an undergraduate at Peking University in Beijing, I earned a five-year Bachelor of Medicine degree. It also included a year-long clinical internship, during which I became very interested in using evidence to inform clinical practices. Epidemiology is the tool to generate such evidence.

At the end of my undergraduate program, I decided to pursue a career in public health and enrolled in the Master of Science in Public Health (MSPH) program at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore, Maryland. I eventually enrolled in the PhD program at Johns Hopkins, where I studied child health and development. I continued with epidemiology research on gestational diabetes during my postdoc at NICHD.

As an epidemiologist by training, what do you work on at NCI? Under the supervision of Senior Investigator Dr. Maria Teresa Landi, I lead the operation of two multi-center studies on melanoma and lung cancer. My responsibilities include:

» Overseeing the collection, quality control, and processing of data, clinical records, and medical images

(continued on page 3)
Letter from the Editor

One of my favorite activities as The NICHD Connection editor is following up with former NICHD fellows. This month, we check in with Dr. Mengying Li, former postdoctoral fellow of the Zhang lab (Division of Intramural Population Health Research). Dr. Li has extensive epidemiology experience, and she is putting those skills to work as a staff scientist at the National Cancer Institute, where she supports melanoma and lung cancer research.

As we follow up with Dr. Li, we also welcome our newest clinical fellows to the NICHD training programs. Check out page 6 to match a few names to faces!

We round out this issue with a new “Deconstructing Bias” column on structural racism. Postbac fellow Frances Fernando writes about the definition and implications of this important topic and offers a few examples of structural racism to consider. Plus, she presents additional learning material at the end of the article.

With that, please remember to browse this month’s Rep Report and September announcements for information about upcoming programs and events! Enjoy the cooler weather, and we’ll see you next month.

Your Editor in Chief,
Shana R. Spindler, PhD

Do you know a former NICHD fellow who has an interesting career? Let us know by contacting our editor at shana.spindler@nih.gov!
Former Fellow Follow-Up with Dr. Mengying Li, Staff Scientist
(continued from page 1)

» Receiving multiple types of biospecimens
» Managing study personnel, contracts, budgets, and ethics requirements

Outside of these projects, I also have opportunities to lead research projects, which includes analyzing data, preparing manuscripts, and mentoring trainees.

How did you find your way from your NICHD postdoctoral work to your position at NCI?
At the end of my postdoctoral fellowship, I applied for positions in different sectors that would utilize my epidemiologic training well. I set up job notifications in various job platforms, which would send me updates daily. I think I saw the posting for my current position on Google Careers first.

The application required a cover letter, CV, and a statement of research interest. I was invited for a video call with the PI, and then I had half-day onsite interviews with the branch and the team. These were traditional interviews covering interests, experiences, career plans, etc. The application and interview process took about a month, and the administrative process to approve the position took three to four months, which is the normal expectation. The COVID pandemic might have also slowed the process a bit.

What’s your typical day like?
My day usually starts before 9 a.m. I spend a couple of hours responding to emails requesting immediate input from collaborators, team members, and the PI; this usually happens first thing in the morning and throughout the day as needed.

Over the course of the day, I work through issues down my priority list, and I hold regular and ad hoc meetings with team members, collaborators, and/or the PI. Some days, I work on tasks requiring a longer, focused stretch of time—such as data analysis, literature reviews, and writing.

(continued on page 4)
Former Fellow Follow-Up with Dr. Mengying Li, Staff Scientist
(continued from page 3)

What do you like best about being a staff scientist?
I love to engage with our team and trainees and play a more active role in managing projects. It is a good opportunity to contribute to science from a different angle and to build my managerial skill set. The skills I practice the most in my current job are planning, prioritizing tasks, managing timelines, problem-solving, communicating technical and interpersonal information, building the team, mentoring, and delegating tasks.

What types of obstacles do you encounter as a staff scientist, and where do you seek out mentorship?
Some of the bigger challenges are juggling multiple priorities, learning new skills in managing projects and people, and further development of technical expertise. So far, I have participated in the Staff Scientists and Staff Clinicians Career Enrichment Program (SCEP) offered by NCI, through which I found invaluable mentorship from my career network, the program’s organizers, and peer staff scientists.

Were there any workshops or programs at NICHD that helped you secure your current position?
Many of the programs that I participated in while at NICHD were very helpful for me to obtain my current position, particularly in improving my soft skills and networking to better understand available job opportunities. These included:
» The SciPhD program offered by NICHD
» Training sessions for the Three-Minute-Talk competition
» Workshops on general interviewing skills
» OITE’s Workplace Dynamics and Management Bootcamp series

Do you have any final tips for fellows who are thinking about becoming a staff scientist?
Besides showing scientific productivity in the form of publications, presentations, and awards, it is also important to build soft skills and network to become informed about available opportunities.

There are so many types of soft skills you can build. I think a first step for fellows with a primarily academic background is to build self-awareness

(continued on page 5)
and self-understanding. This will help you to recognize your strengths and preferences, and to identify what experience you already have in different areas. For this purpose, I highly recommend the Workplace Dynamics series offered by OITE at the NIH as a starting point.

My advice for networking is for any job in general, and not just limited to staff scientist positions. First of all, talk to your peers! They are in the job market too and could provide you with the most current and in-depth insight about potential opportunities; plus, we are great support for each other at this criterial period of transition, during which many of us find stress.

NIH also has a very active community of fellows. Joining career panels, interest groups, and scientific/career events can connect you with like-minded fellows (look out for emails about such opportunities). Further, many career events offer a great opportunity to find out about the variety of career paths. The ones I found helpful were the Annual NICHD Fellows Retreat and the SciPhD program, which invited panelists from different career paths.

More broadly, I like to connect through LinkedIn with alumni and professionals in career paths that I am interested in understanding. Even if you don’t know the person previously, you’ll be surprised at how readily folks are willing to help.
A Warm Welcome to Our 2021 Incoming Clinical Fellows

We’d like to introduce our newest group of clinical fellows who arrived this summer. Welcome to the family!

INTER-INSTITUTE ENDOCRINOLOGY TRAINING PROGRAM

Sanjay Jumani, MD

PEDIATRIC ENDOCRINOLOGY TRAINING PROGRAM

Zubeyir Gun, MD

PEDIATRIC AND ADOLESCENT GYNECOLOGY TRAINING PROGRAM

Jessica Long, MD

(continued on page 7)
A Warm Welcome to Our 2021 Incoming Clinical Fellows

(continued from page 6)

REPRODUCTIVE ENDOCRINOLOGY AND INFERTILITY TRAINING PROGRAM

Shelley Dolitsky, MD
Charlene Echague, DO
Adina Schwartz, MD
Meghan Yamasaki, DO
“Racism” is defined as a system—consisting of structures, policies, practices, and norms—that assigns value and determines opportunity based on the way people look or the color of their skin. This system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on the social interpretation of how one looks results in conditions that unfairly disadvantages some and advantage others in society.

Structural racism does not have an official definition, although many exist. The various definitions converge upon how racism is not only a product of individual prejudices, but also a combination of public policies, institutional practices, social forces, ideologies and processes that generate and perpetuate inequities among races. Structural racism affects the entire racial diaspora. It goes beyond the individual level to the economic system, cultural and societal norms, and is produced and reproduced by laws, rules, and practices.

Structural racism is not a chosen practice, but it is a result of persistent inequality over time that has become ingrained into the social, economic, and political systems in which we live. It manifests in societal conditions and the capacity for influence. This is observed in differential access to housing, transportation, education, medical services, clean air or water, and a healthy environment, as well as differential access to information, resources, and voice. It also provides opportunities to certain groups over others and undermines the full potential of certain communities, as their contributions are not valued and not allowed to fully develop.

Structural racism stretches across institutions and economies, breeding within our cultural practices. The durability of structural racism calls for involvement from the whole of society in redefining and reexamining policies, structures, and our own engagement with race. Learn more about how structural racism presents in the examples and resources cited below.

STRUCTURAL RACISM IN HEALTHCARE
Structural racism is intimately connected to observed health inequities. When the epidemic of racism remains unaddressed, the health of minority communities will be disproportionately affected. Racial health disparities stem from differential care within the health care system, differential access to health care services, and differences in exposure and life opportunities. This unequal distribution of

(continued on page 9)
services and opportunities intensify disease burden in certain communities. Diseases become embedded disruptors of equality, playing on and exacerbating longstanding vulnerabilities in health systems. This has been demonstrated in the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities of color.

REDLINING IN HOUSING CREATES STRUCTURAL RACISM

In 1933, the housing industry began to use racial composition to determine whether a neighborhood was a good investment and whether its residents would receive home loans. Industry decision-makers would draw “red lines” geographically around neighborhoods, hence the name redlining. This lack of access to home ownership would prevent the option of intergenerational wealth transfer. Redlining also supported the narrative that these residents were bad neighbors who would bring down property values and increase crime. The legacy of redlining can be found today in neighborhoods that are densely populated and lack healthy food options, green spaces, recreational facilities, and lighting and safety. These are only two examples of structural racism; many more exist. Does structural racism impact your research and lab environment? If so, how, and what can you do? For more information about what role you can play to address structural racism, please reach out to the NIH Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Consulting Guidance Team.

ADDITIONAL LEARNING:


The Rep Report
By Lauren Walling, PhD

As the current NICHD Basic Sciences Institutes and Centers (IC) Representative, I represent NICHD postdoctoral fellows at the Fellows Committee (FelCom) meeting every month and share the latest news with you here. Do you have a concern or question that you want brought up at the next meeting? Contact me at lauren.walling@nih.gov!

The Visiting Fellows Committee is resuming in person social events! Keep an eye on your email for information regarding networking opportunities and social events like group hikes. This committee is looking for a new Brown Bag Seminar liaison, as well as new members to join their Social and Science Voices From Home Subcommittees. Please contact Vrushali Agashe (vrushali.agashe@nih.gov) or Zeni Wu (zeni.wu@nih.gov) if you are interested!

NCI-Shady Grove will be hosting virtual career roundtable sessions on September 10, from 1–3:15 p.m. The event will include individuals from the FDA, industry, and academia. For more information, please contact the FelCom Shady Grove representative, Gieira Jones (gieira.jones@nih.gov).

The National Postdoctoral Association recently held a Gender Equity Summit in July. This summit covered topics ranging from achieving equity for postdocs, strategies on postdoc career advancement, and LGBTQ+ issues in the postdoc environment. All sessions were recorded and are available online at https://www.nationalpostdoc.org/page/2021GES.

Finally, September 20–24 is National Postdoc Appreciation week. Thank you to our postdoctoral fellows for all your hard work and important contributions to advancing science!
September Announcements

DUE THIS MONTH: INTRAMURAL RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP (IRF)

*Funding opportunity for all NICHD fellows*

In 2017, DIR launched the Intramural Research Fellowship (IRF), a competitive research funding opportunity for NICHD postdoctoral, visiting, and clinical fellows. Its main objective is to promote grant writing among our intramural trainees, while enhancing awareness of the various components of an NIH grant application.

The IRF submission date is **Monday, September 8, 2021**.

For more information on the IRF, please visit [NICHD Intramural Research Fellowships](https://nichd.nih.gov/training/IRF.aspx) or email Dr. Triesta Fowler ([fowlerlt@mail.nih.gov](mailto:fowlerlt@mail.nih.gov)).

DUE THIS MONTH: SALZMAN VIROLOGY AWARD APPLICATION

The Salzman Virology Awards honor the 40-year career of Dr. Norman P. Salzman in virology research and his accomplishments in mentoring of young scientists. Two awards will be given. One postdoctoral fellow will receive a plaque and an award of $2,500. One graduate student/postbaccalaureate trainee will receive a plaque and an award of $1,000. The mentors of the awardees will each receive a plaque. The winners will give talks during the virtual 23rd Annual Norman P. Salzman Memorial Symposium in Basic and Clinical Virology on Monday, November 8, while selected other applicants will be invited to present posters.

The application due date for the Salzman Virology Awards is **September 30, 2021**. Application forms and eligibility information can be found at [fnih.org/SalzmanSymposium](https://fnih.org/SalzmanSymposium).

DUE NEXT MONTH: PRAT PROGRAM APPLICATIONS DUE OCTOBER 4

Fellows in the NIGMS Postdoctoral Research Associate Training (PRAT) program receive three years of stipend support to conduct independent, mentored research in an NIH intramural laboratory. The PRAT application process is like the F32 Postdoctoral NRSA, and applicants who are already in the NIH intramural program may apply if they began postdoctoral training on or after June 1, 2020, and are a U.S. citizen or permanent resident.

The PRAT program is especially interested in ensuring the applicant pool reflects the diversity of the biomedical PhD talent pool, and strongly encourages applications from scientists in groups underrepresented in the biomedical sciences. For more information about the program, eligibility, and the NIGMS mission, please visit [https://www.nigms.nih.gov/training/pages/prat.aspx](https://www.nigms.nih.gov/training/pages/prat.aspx).

*(continued on page 12)*
September Announcements  
(continued from page 11)

**NICHD ANNUAL POSTBAC SEMINAR SERIES: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CAREER EXPLORATION**

*The next cycle of our Annual Postbac Seminar Series begins this month!*

Currently there are over 100 postbacs conducting clinical and basic science research in our intramural laboratories. During your one or two years of training here at the NICHD, we want you to have an enriched research experience, while at the same time growing more prepared and excited about your chosen career path.

**The year’s course will take place (virtually*) on Wednesdays, from 1 to 2 p.m.** The intent is to create a comfortable environment within a small group of peers to help postbacs improve their analytical skills as scientists, while expanding their knowledge of biomedical research and its relevance to human health.

This course also focuses on professional development:
» Learning how to present your science  
» Exploring different career trajectories  
» Meeting physicians and scientists from various clinical or research settings  
» Preparing for the medical or graduate school application cycle (including interviews!)

*All sessions will be held via Zoom until NIH guidance permits in-person meetings.

**Upcoming sessions (to take place from 1 to 2 p.m. unless otherwise indicated):**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>SPEAKER</th>
<th>TOPIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 29</td>
<td>Public Speaking Coach, Scott Morgan</td>
<td>Speaking About Science: Giving Scientific Presentations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 20</td>
<td>Public Speaking Coach, Scott Morgan</td>
<td>Interviewing for Professional School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additional sessions will be announced in upcoming newsletter issues, and via email.  
*Enrollment in this course will be limited to 25 students to allow maximum participation and interaction with the instructors.*

If you are interested in joining the class, please email Katherine Lamb (katherine.lamb@nih.gov) to register and let her know which sessions you plan to attend.

*(continued on page 13)*
September Announcements
(continued from page 12)

THE FELLOW’S SAFETY COMMITTEE IS RECRUITING NEW MEMBERS
The Fellow’s Safety Committee was started by NIH fellows to act as a conduit between the research community and the Division of Health and Safety (DOHS). We provide a platform for fellows to discuss safety in and out of the laboratory and the opportunity to take part in a service activity.

The ability to perform cutting edge science safely is an in-demand skill that will distinguish you to future employers. When you join the committee, you have the opportunity to gain leadership experience and network with DOHS and across multiple ICs here at NIH. Please feel free to reach out to our Secretary/Outreach Coordinator Anna SantaMaria (anna.santamaria@nih.gov) for more information!

SAVE THE DATE: WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 27, ANNUAL DIPHR & DIR JOINT SCIENTIFIC RETREAT
Please mark your calendars for the annual DIPHR & DIR Joint Scientific Retreat, which will be held virtually this year on Wednesday, October 27. We strongly encourage all NICHD intramural researchers, PIs, and lab members to attend as we celebrate our research achievements and try to spark new ideas and collaborations.

Agenda coming soon!
September Events

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 1–2 PM
NICHD New Postbac Orientation Session

Our institute has approximately 100 postbacs conducting both clinical and basic science research. The Office of Education would like to bring our postbacs together to meet each other and discuss opportunities for service and leadership, along with the various resources and services available to you at NICHD and NIH-wide.

We aim to enrich fellows’ NIH experience with career development, outreach, and social activities. Learn about:

» NIH Library resources
» The Annual Postbac Seminar Series
» Opportunities for enhancing your science communications skills
» Shadowing opportunities in the NIH Clinical Center
» NICHD Office of Education Services & Resources
» The Office of Intramural Training and Education
» Medical & Graduate School Application Support
» And more!

The NICHD Postbac Orientation Session is mandatory for all postbacs who started on or after January 2021, but ALL NICHD postbacs are welcome to join. To register, please contact Ms. Katherine Lamb (katherine.lamb@nih.gov).

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 12–5 PM
STRIVE Workshop 4: Community-Engaged Research Strategies to Mitigate Health Disparities in NICHD Populations

NICHD launched its STRategies to enRich Inclusion and achieVe Equity (STRIVE) Initiative to improve equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in all aspects of its research and workforce. STRIVE, which complements NIH UNITE, focuses on taking action to improve EDI within NICHD and the scientific community, and expand health disparities research to develop solutions.

The goals of this workshop are to describe community-engaged research strategies to prevent and reduce health disparities in NICHD populations (women, children, and people with disabilities) and to identify gaps and opportunities for future health disparities research focused on these population groups.

To register for this and future workshops in the series, please visit the STRIVE workshop website.

(continued on page 15)
September Events
(continued from page 14)

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 1–2 PM
“Speaking About Science”
Public Speaking Coach, Scott Morgan

To kick off the next cycle of our Annual Postbac Seminar Series, on Wednesday, September 29th, Public Speaking Coach Scott Morgan will offer his acclaimed workshop “Speaking About Science.” This is a great opportunity for newer postbacs to learn strategies and tips for giving effective science presentations, whether at lab meetings or for larger audiences of broad scientific backgrounds. “Speaking about Science” is a highly interactive workshop that introduces a nine-step preparation process to prepare a clear and engaging talk for a variety of scientific audiences.

Topics include:
» Presenting data
» Identifying theme and focus
» Creating effective visual aids
» Beginning and ending a talk

Please email Katherine Lamb (katherine.lamb@nih.gov) if you plan to attend. The Zoom link will be provided several days prior.