

ALUMNI FEATURE: Sara Elgaard Jager, Postdoctoral Research Fellow with Lundbeck Fellowship at King's College London

In brief, tell me about your specific field of research and explain why you are interested in this particular area?

I do basic research in relation to pain and chronic pain after a nerve injury. I am interested in the interplay between neurons, glial cells and immune cells and how this possibly contributes to the development of chronic pain. Chronic pain is a global problem with limited treatment options that are inadequate in providing pain relief. The lack of efficient medication is rooted in a poor understanding of why pain becomes chronic. With a better understanding of the cellular mechanisms behind chronic pain we will be able to develop efficient medication and help the patients to a pain free life.

What was most memorable to you about your experiences in your PhD and postdoctoral program, and what was most memorable to you about your experiences at DANDRITE and Aarhus University?

I did my PhD at Associate Professor Christian Vægter's lab where I had freedom to plan my own time and research project. The Vægter lab is affiliated to DANDRITE, which allowed me to participate in the international environment at DANDRITE. Looking back, I specifically remember the first time I had to present my research at the biweekly internal meeting – a forum where students, young researchers and PI's have the opportunity to discuss their research and provide feedback. I was very nervous and had spent a lot of time preparing and I failed miserably. I lost the audience within the first minute and the questions I received after my presentation had nothing to do with what I intended to communicate. I talked to Susanne Sjøgaard about my frustrations and she told me that my slides were beautiful. That made me realize that not everything was lost and that it would be possible for me to become a better communicator. I started by participating in PhD courses for research presentation provided by Health and Aarhus University. I especially learned a lot from the course "Research presenter" taught by Mads Ronald Dahl. I think this course was helpful for me because I had an open mind and was very eager to learn. Following that course, I kept challenging myself by doing various type of communication including talks to lay people at the Danish science festival, written communication on videnskab.dk and of course scientific talks and presentations. Most recently, I participated in the Danish PhD cup 2019, which was an amazing and challenging experience. I learnt how other people perceive me when I give a presentation and how to connect with the audience.

How have you used your skills and experiences gained at DANDRITE and Aarhus University in your subsequent positions? What advice would you give to someone who is considering pursuing a doctorate within science?

For me it has been fulfilling to identify a weakness (my presentation skills) that I could work on improving in parallel with my research in the lab. As I see it, improving my

scientific communication skills have been key in securing my current funding, and in transforming my scientific presentations into fun instead of something, I fear.

*Describe your career path since completing your education at Aarhus University?
Where are you now?*

During my PhD I spent 6 months at King's College London with Professor Stephen McMahon and Dr. Franziska Denk. During this time, I realized that I would like to do a postdoc at King's College London. I discussed this with Dr. Denk and she was happy to help with writing the application to secure the funding. I submitted to various Danish funds and was lucky to get a 3-year Lundbeck Fellowship via their International Neuroscience programme. I have just completed my first year in Denk lab and I am very excited that I have at least two more years here.

Text: Sara Elgaard Jager