



Networking, inspiration, and the future of oral health research

When I decided to go to New York City and attend the 2025 AADOCR/CADR Annual Meeting & Exhibition, I thought I was just going there to present my research and receive feedback. I imagined I would stand by my poster, answer some questions, listen to a few presentations, and that would be it. But what actually happened was so much more than that. It was an experience that completely changed the way I see my career, the power of networking, and the importance of mentorship in shaping the future of oral health research.

The moment I arrived at the conference, it felt like I had landed in Hollywood. I was surrounded by some of the biggest names in the field of dentistry and oral health, the people I had only seen in author lists on research papers and textbooks. These are not just academics and faculties, they are legends in the field, people whose work I had read and admired for years. Seeing them in person, hearing them speak, and even having the chance to talk to them was an experience I never expected to have so early in my career.

Through the dedication of my supervisor, I had the incredible opportunity to meet some of these distinguished researchers. Not only did I shake hands with them, but I also got to sit down for coffee or dinner with some of them, listen to their personal stories, and learn about their journeys. These weren't just quick conversations about research, they were deep, meaningful discussions that gave me insight into their struggles, successes, and the paths they took to get where they are today.

One of the most inspiring moments was during a dinner that I was invited to join with a dean of one of the leading US dental schools and couple of his colleagues. The dean pointed to one of his faculty members at the table and said, "Do you see this professor sitting with us? She started at our university as a foreign trained student who had just immigrated to the US. She completed her studies, pursued her research, and thanks to her unwavering dedication and hard work, she has been hired as faculty member and today, she is the founding director of Perinatal Oral Health at our institution." That moment hit me hard and made me feel inspired. It made me realize that the people I admire so much didn't just appear in these positions over-

night. They started exactly where we are as students trying to figure things out, facing doubts, making mistakes, but pushing forward anyway. It showed me that success in academia isn't just about intelligence or luck, it's about having great mentors, making the right connections, working hard, being resilient, and continuously striving to improve.

Attending the conference also made me reflect on how networking and mentorship influence not only students but also the future of oral health itself. When we, as students, have the opportunity to connect with experienced professionals and gain exposure to the latest research, we are better equipped to push it forward. We become the next generation of innovators, clinicians, and educators who will address critical gaps in oral health care. This process ultimately benefits patients as well, as advancements in research and clinical practice lead to improved treatments, prevention strategies, and health care policies. The more students are encouraged to engage with experts and explore interdisciplinary collaborations, the more we can contribute to innovative discoveries that enhance patient care.

One of the biggest lessons I took away from the conference was that networking and mentorship can completely shape the course of a researcher's career. As students, we often think that if we just focus on our coursework and research, everything else will fall into place. But the truth is, connecting with others in the field, learning from their experiences, and building strong relationships is just as important as the research itself.

From my perspective, networking isn't just about collecting business cards or adding people on LinkedIn. It's about forming real, meaningful connections with people who can offer guidance, open doors, and help shape our careers. It's about learning from those who have already been through what we're going through and understanding the different paths a career in oral health research can take.

I truly believe that mentors and supervisors should actively create opportunities for their students to connect with experts in the field. Encouraging students to attend conferences, introducing them to key researchers, and fostering an environment where they can engage with professionals outside of their



immediate research groups can have a huge impact on their growth and confidence. I have been lucky to have a mentor who understands this, and because of him, I was able to meet incredible researchers, have thought-provoking conversations, and gain insights and inspiration that will stay with me throughout my career.

The conference also completely shifted the way I see my own future. Being a student, especially in research, can be tough. There are long hours in the lab, reading or on the laptop writing, constant self-doubt, and the pressure to produce meaningful results. Sometimes it feels isolating, like the work we're doing doesn't have a bigger impact. But being at the conference and seeing firsthand how oral health research is evolving on a global scale reminded me of why I chose this field. It made me realize that every study, every experiment, and every paper we publish contributes to something much greater than ourselves.

For students, the biggest lesson I can share is this: don't be afraid to reach out to people in your field. Ask questions, seek advice, and learn from those who have already walked the path you're on. Step out of your comfort zone, engage in conversations, and take advantage of every networking opportunity you can. It's easy to feel like we're not ready or that we don't belong in certain spaces, but the truth is, every expert was once a beginner; every legend I had the privilege to meet at this conference was once a young student. The only way to grow is to put ourselves in situations where we can learn from the best.

Looking back on my experience at the 2025 AADOCR/CADR Annual Meeting & Exhibition, I realize that what I gained was so much more than just a conference to present my research. I left with a renewed sense of motivation, a deeper understanding of my career path, and a strong belief in the importance of mentorship and networking. The future of oral health research depends

on hard work and dedication, combined with collaboration, the sharing of knowledge, and experienced professionals investing in the next generation. When students are supported and inspired, they carry that passion into their work, ultimately improving the field and the care that patients receive.

In the words of John C. Maxwell: "A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way." Great mentors do exactly that. They guide, inspire, and empower their students and mentees to reach new heights. And as students, we are forever grateful for the opportunities they provide. This conference was a defining moment in my journey, and I look forward to applying the lessons I have learned as I continue to grow in the field of oral health research.

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