

THE NAMS MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

An ocean between: the Archer-Stute mentor-mentee pair in The North American Menopause Society Mentorship Program

What is the value in a mentor-mentee relationship when each individual is separated by an ocean? Fortunately, one of the six mentor-mentee pairs in the inaugural class in The North American Menopause Society (NAMS) Mentorship Program can answer this question. David Archer and Petra Stute are developing an e-mail rapport that benefits each of them and allows the research pursuit of an important question.

Petra Stute, MD, PhD, moved from the University of Muenster, Germany, where she trained in obstetrics and gynecology, to Berne, Switzerland, in April 2009. In Germany, Petra was an active member of the German Menopause Society, serving as one of its officers. She is now the Deputy Chief of the Department of Gynecologic Endocrinology and Infertility at the Berne University Hospital. Although most of Petra's time is devoted to clinical care of patients, 25% of her time is protected for teaching and research.



In 2001, Petra was introduced by a colleague to Tom Clarkson. Not surprisingly, an interaction with Tom stimulated Petra to obtain a research grant that supported her 1.5-year postdoctoral experience working with Mark Cline at Wake Forest University. Her project focused on breast tissue enzyme reactions in response to hormonal therapy administered to monkeys. She has continued to visit Winston-Salem and continues to investigate breast tissue responses. "I have always been a fan of NAMS, and especially enjoy the NAMS Annual Meeting. Upon hearing of the mentor-mentee program, I was eager and happy to apply. This opportunity allows me to expand into clinical research, building on my preclinical experience."

Petra's project with David Archer is measuring vaginal cytokine levels, documenting differences in normal and atrophic conditions, especially comparing asymptomatic and symptomatic women. David has an interest in questioning the presence of vaginal immune mechanisms in postmenopausal women. This is a subject that has received scant study, probably because of the rarity of vaginal infections in postmenopausal women. It is not far-fetched to consider that estrogen could play a role in maintaining secretory proteins in the vagina, and measuring vaginal cytokine content in women

symptomatic with vaginal atrophy is a first step that could lead to new treatments.

Petra's hypothesis is that vaginal cytokines in women with symptomatic vaginal atrophy are similar to what is found in younger women with vaginitis. Her preliminary work was the subject of an abstract presented at the 2010 NAMS Annual Meeting, entitled "Vaginal cytokines in postmenopausal women with symptoms of vulvovaginal irritation." The next step is to seek funding for an intervention study, assessing the impact of hormonal treatment on vaginal cytokines.

Without e-mail communication, this mentor-mentee pairing would not work well. The time difference alone makes contact by telephone difficult. Thank goodness for the modern world. Contact with the United States and NAMS is very important to Petra. She is emphatic in encouraging NAMS to continue the Mentorship Program. She finds it a perfect mechanism for someone in a foreign country to have connections to the United States. Petra found that her senior colleagues ("her bosses") were especially proud of her American connection and cooperation. She is thankful to have had the opportunity to learn the American way of working and thinking. She is struck by the contrast between her American and European experience, notably the more hierarchical European system that often hampers independence for young investigators.

David Archer, MD, is a Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the Jones Institute of Reproductive Medicine and the Eastern Virginia Medical School in Norfolk. He wears many hats. He administers both the Residency Program and the Fellowship Program in Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility. He also is the Director of the Clinical Research Center and Chief of Contraceptive Research and Development for CONRAD. An addition to those responsibilities is David's participation in multiple worldwide meetings and committees. Do you get the idea that David has trouble saying no? No wonder he jumped at the opportunity to participate in the NAMS Mentorship Program. David has been a longtime participant in NAMS, serving as president from 1997 to 1998. David said that he had a desire to make sure the young people understand the difficulties in obtaining research funding and the



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importance of perseverance when encountering rejection (as often as it is said to be for a first novel).

“An ocean between” does raise a key point. As David pointed out, e-mails are a problem; “they are terse. Communication between mentors and mentees is an important issue no matter where you are, and an ocean doesn’t obstruct emails.” But philosophy and deeper discussions depend on face-to-face meetings, underscoring the importance of attending the NAMS Annual Meeting. This new world of instant communication raises a new challenge; it requires us to develop a new sensitivity, a heightened attention to transmit personal concerns and thoughts electronically.

In David’s opinion, there is a demand for mentors, especially in modern times when the clinical obligations weigh so

heavily on young people. He believes that the NAMS Mentorship Program is a feather in NAMS’ hat, innovative and serving an important purpose. The biggest obstacle is finding funding for specific projects; no surprise there! Funding is a difficult challenge for both mentee and mentor and perhaps a new obligation for NAMS.

Financial disclosure/conflicts of interest: None reported.

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