

JeffPost

(Empowering Postdoctoral Careers)

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We have two new members in the Jefferson Postdoctoral Association (JPA) Executive Board family! Here is a short glimpse of their individual stories. We welcome them and look forward to working together as a team.

JPA Executive Board Members



Mouadh Barbirou, MSc, PhD
VICE-PRESIDENT, CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Mouadh is a molecular biologist currently working as a postdoctoral associate in the Medical Oncology department of Jefferson Health. Mouadh completed a PhD from Tunis el Manar University in collaboration with University of Missouri as a visiting scholar. Before joining Jefferson, Mouadh worked at Fox Chase Cancer Center. Dr. Barbirou has been preparing for a career in biomedical science that includes translating scientific discoveries into clinical practice.

Mouadh's general research interest is in the molecular etiology of cancer with a particular focus on mechanisms of cancer susceptibility. The profound problems of cancer research center on an inter-individual variance of the characterization of cancer, its symptoms, molecular mechanisms of development, response to treatments, and outcomes. Mouadh's ultimate objective is to seek and understand the molecular basis of that variation, establish scientific clarity of the causes, and participate in the use of novel knowledge to improve detection, treatment, and outcomes. In addition, Mouadh's goal is to translate scientific results and knowledge into clinical practice and patient health care, thereby making the potential of precision medicine applicable. After spending 2 years at Fox Chase Cancer Center and 4 years at University of Missouri, Mouadh joined Jefferson as a Postdoctoral Associate in the Medical Oncology Department. The new role enabled participation in programs, projects, and forums to pursue biomedical and translational precision medicine research and bioinformatics computing to conduct assigned experiments for the whole genome, exome, transcriptome, differential expression, and metabolomics using high throughput sequencing related to liquid biopsy investigation.

Mouadh has joined JPA because it is a great opportunity for Jefferson's postdocs to get to know each other, build internal networks, meet people from different backgrounds, and learn from their cultures. In Mouadh's own words, "I also like to be involved in scientific and social activities related to the institute I work for and help new people by sharing my knowledge and experiments."

Arun Kumar, PhD
VICE-PRESIDENT NOMINATIONS AND ELECTIONS



Arun joined the Jefferson Postdoctoral Association (JPA) because he thinks JPA is a great platform to enhance his leadership qualities and improve communication skills. JPA has enabled him to meet colleagues and peers in his field of interest and provided a chance to meet fellow postdocs to share knowledge and make new connections. He feels JPA plays a significant role in developing his career in science.

It has been a great pleasure for Arun to work in airway biology under the able supervision of Prof. Raymond B. Penn at Jefferson. Arun's research is primarily focused on identifying cellular and molecular mechanisms by which G protein-coupled receptors (GPCRs) regulate vital functions in airway smooth muscle cells. Arun feels that the work environment in his lab is full of enthusiasm due to the presence of experienced and friendly supervisors and cooperative colleagues.

Arun is interested in volunteering for outreach programs for charitable organizations and relevant social activities. In Arun's own words, "If I was not a scientist I would have been an entrepreneur or a social activist." Arun is fond of music, learning about religious scriptures, and attending religious seminars and meetings.

We have some exciting news from the Postdoctoral Scientific Editing and Reviewing Team (PSERT)!

The Postdoctoral Scientific Editing and Reviewing Team (PSERT), formed in 2018, provides a way for postdocs to practice being reviewers by giving feedback on manuscript drafts and other scholarly communication. All postdocs are welcome to participate by either joining PSERT or by submitting manuscripts and posters for team review.

Recently, PSERT has had a change in leadership. Dr. Nikita Nikita, founding member and Editor-in-Chief, has transitioned to a role as Faculty Advisor. Dr. Nikita has participated in all PSERT activities since its inception. In 2022, she stepped into the role of Editor-in-Chief, but she was also promoted to a faculty position in the Sidney Kimmel Cancer Center. Thus, although she will no longer be a member of PSERT, she will continue to serve as a mentor.

We are pleased to announce that Dr. Ankita Srivastava will assume the role of Editor-in-Chief for PSERT. As a member of PSERT and then Associate Editor, Dr. Srivastava has been refining her skills as a reviewer and editor. Her enthusiasm and experience as a reviewer for several journals will be put to good use.

Please reach out to Drs. Srivastava or Nikita if you are interested in joining PSERT or would like to know more:

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Nikita Nikita, MD, MPH Research Instructor, PSERT Faculty Advisor

Dr. Nikita is currently a Research Instructor in the Sidney Kimmel Cancer Center at Jefferson Health. She was one of the founding members of PSERT as a postdoc in Dr. Grace Lu-Yao's lab. She completed her MD in India and received a Master of Public Health (MPH) from Boston University. She is strongly motivated to help improve the life of patients with cancer, addressing issues related to co-morbidities and improving treatment outcomes. Her research focuses on prostate cancer, geriatric oncology, and immunotherapy.

Ankita Srivastava, PhD Postdoctoral Fellow, PSERT Editor-in-chief

Ankita completed her PhD in Biotechnology from National Center for Cell Science, Pune, India. Her doctoral research focused on Ras isoform-targeted immunotherapy for parasitic immune response. Ankita joined Thomas Jefferson University in the Department of Pathology and Genomic Medicine as a postdoctoral researcher in 2017. Her current research in Dr. Vadigepalli's lab focuses on identifying putative targets for intervention in alcoholic liver disease.

Ankita is an experienced reviewer and editor for several journals and joined PSERT in 2021. Currently, she is the Editor-in-Chief of the PSERT and encourages postdocs to join the PSERT editorial team and submit manuscripts for review and editing.



As the JPA's Vice-President of Communications, I interviewed two former Jefferson postdocs who have recently transitioned into new exciting roles in academia and non-profit organizations. I present to you an account of their stories and opinions on science, life, and beyond. I spoke to Dr. Ankit Rochani who, apart from being a Jefferson postdoc, was also former VP of Communications for JPA and Editor-in-chief of PSERT. Dr. Rochani joined Wegman School of Pharmacy in Rochester as an Assistant Professor and shared his insights about his journey. I also spoke to Dr. Anil Noronha Antony who was a former Jefferson postdoc and PhD student at the MitoCare unit and successfully transitioned into the role of Assistant Director of Corporate Alliances at American Association for Cancer Research. Dr. Antony answered questions and shared his account of the transition.



Ankit Rochani, PhD
Assistant Professor, Wegman School of Pharmacy

How did you land in your current position? How did your job search go? What was the interview process like?

I saw the position on American Association for Pharmacy Colleges (AAPC) website and applied for it. My job search was strategic and employed broader technical expertise. To be noticed by recruiters, it's important to review the job ad for key terms and skills and include both your scientific and non-scientific skills in your resume or CV. I was active on various public forums like Indeed, LinkedIn, AAPC, and AAPS (American Association of Pharmaceutical Society). Having strategic connections helps to be noticed for potential job opportunities. The interview process for both companies and academia is usually long and extensive. It comprises zoom sessions, onsite teaching, research presentations, and meetings with search committee members and all top administrators of the institutes.

What do you like/dislike about the current role?

It is a bittersweet situation. I had two options to get more pay in a company vs. steady academic work with flexibility. A higher teaching load here has reduced my research activities. I do miss my research but sometimes it is important to have a sense of work-life balance.

How was your postdoctoral training useful in getting your current position?

I was trained in **i)** doing cutting-edge research where I could extend my services to clinical research and **ii)** mentoring PharmD, Master's, and PhD students in compounding labs and helping them conduct scientific research so that they have options to move their career in several directions.

Teaching, technical training, and tangible contribution to clinical utilities have been my core philosophies. Fortunately, most of my work was sub-contractual activity that helped me gain a perspective of working for various organizations and hospitals and helped me keep my research more realistic and application-oriented. I worked on a project funded by NIH, the Gates Foundation, startups, hospital pharmacies, and other organizations. This kept me in the unique position of working at industrial standards and constantly auditing to comply with good laboratory practice (GLP) standards. As a result, my background was suited for both industrial and academic job options.

What advice do you have for current postdocs looking for positions in academia?

Get involved in JPA and participate in developing academic and social events. This is one of the services to the school and university. It is important to have this profile on your CV. The job search committee appreciated my involvement with PSERT and as VP of Communication at JPA.

Did you apply for independent funding? How did you educate yourself on funding opportunities?

I am currently working at a teaching institute where research is secondary in nature. However, I am encouraged to apply for independent funding and continue my research activities.

How smooth/difficult were the immigration policies in the case of your transition?

Sponsorship is a tricky business for some postdocs from Asian countries, specifically India. Similar to many Asians, my situation was no different. I lost multiple job opportunities, as the organizations were unable to provide sponsorship. Academic H1B sponsorship is the most acceptable method for hiring in most research or teaching-based institutions. I was able to get my green card that helped me get here. I would like to thank Dr. Kozlowski and Dr. Kaushal for guiding me here. I also got a lot of information on various online portals, like focused groups on Facebook, LinkedIn, Trackit, and telegram.

Do you feel academia needs change? Please elaborate.

Academia is organically evolving to provide a better educational experience. However, there is a need for a change in the perception of students and postdocs. Over the years, people have lost the perception and sensitivity of providing service to the profession, school, and university. I think people should focus on overall professional development and aim for long-term benefits.

What plans do you have for the future?

Continue my collaboration and service to the school, profession, and to my collaborators. I enjoy training young brains, exploring interesting ideas, and troubleshooting problems.

What was the best piece of advice you got when you were a postdoc?

Think about an exit strategy or endgame from being a postdoc. Don't be afraid of trying new activities or joining existing professional development programs or groups like JPA.

What was the contribution of mentors in your academic journey?

My mentors and collaborators—Dr. Kaushal, Dr. Kozlowski, Ms. Pam Walter, Dr. Bhushan, Dr. Walter Kraft, and Dr. Eisenbrey, from Jefferson—have played a significant role in what I am today. I was fortunate to work with various faculties at Jefferson, University of the Sciences, and Drexel University.

Anil Noronha Antony, PhD
Assistant Director, Corporate Alliances,
American Association for Cancer Research (AACR)



What do you do in your current position?

In my current position, I develop strategic partnerships with the biopharmaceutical industry. We create and support programs to meet research needs in oncology. Eradicating cancer is the AACR's mission. I am passionate about this work, and my in-depth knowledge of the science behind the projects gives me an extra boost of confidence.

What excites you the most about your job? Are there any downsides/ disappointments?

What excites me the most is also what I find most challenging: every day, I find myself wearing multiple hats. I interact with the leadership of large pharmaceutical companies, organize events, and act as a bridge between organizations. A significant part of my job is building meaningful relationships that lead to the strategic partnerships that allow us to accomplish larger goals. In terms of downsides, no job will ever be perfect, but if you weigh the pros and cons, you will wind up somewhere where you can be happy.

How did you land up with your current position?

Once I made up my mind to do something different with my scientific training, I actively made efforts to connect with people who were doing the kinds of things that interested me outside of academia and benchwork. I reached out to mentors and other connections, and then came across my current position at the AACR. I spoke with others who were already in the organization, and that helped me make my decision.

How did your previous position at Jefferson help you in finding your current position?

I enjoyed every moment of my graduate and postdoctoral work at Jefferson. Jefferson brought me into close association with mentors who both encouraged me and were great references for establishing contacts at my new workplace. Earning a PhD

also helps you develop soft skills, like project management, that are helpful in just about any position. It is not exclusively about scientific knowledge.

What advice do you have for postdocs looking to transition into similar roles?

Talk to multiple people in similar roles to find out if your interests and passion match the job requirements. If people have non-traditional roles that interest you, ask them about it. Networking always helps. Do not underestimate LinkedIn, for example. Keep an open mind and be ready to learn and unlearn.

Do you miss being a bench scientist?

At certain times, yes. For example, I fondly remember my days at Jefferson, first trying my hands at live imaging of calcium signaling in an intact liver. After a long and grueling day at the microscope, the first Ca^{2+} recording that I saw in that darkroom gave me an amazingly happy feeling. I truly enjoyed the bench work but am also happy with what I do today. I am a hands-on person by nature. In the lab, I developed new protocols and procedures and improved older ones, which is similar to what I do now in a nonscientific context.

Would you like to share your reasons/thoughts that motivated your transition?

As I said earlier, I enjoyed my time as a bench scientist and learning how to become an independent researcher. I invested significant time and effort into my scientific growth, and I am glad I did. However, although I really enjoyed being a bench scientist, I also realized that as I moved up the academic ladder, I would spend less time on the bench and more time working on grant writing and other administrative tasks. So, at a certain point, I simply made the very practical decision that if I was going to do that anyway, I wanted to feel more secure in my compensation and in terms of control over my own time.

Do you feel academia needs change? Please share your thoughts in what ways.

My sense from my mentors is that in the past, being a self-supporting academic researcher was a reliable career path in ways that are not necessarily the case now. Work/life balance is important to me. I am passionate about science, but I do not think all of life should be spent in a lab, and I do not think it is sustainable to produce the best science under those conditions. I think academia needs to appreciate how it has already changed for young researchers, and address the relationship between quality of work and quality of life head-on.

What is next for you?

I am keen on exploring further leadership roles. However, I am still new to the nonprofit space, so I have plenty of growing left to do.

Any recommendations on how to nail that job interview?

Prepare well, and do your research honestly and ahead of time. It is better not to rely on assumptions you learned in the academic world, but be ready to learn and unlearn. Do not underplay your PhD/postdoc or academic skills.

Find a way to leverage those skills in a way suited to the job in question. Do not sell yourself short; know your strengths and market them well.

Report on a career development event in Philly!

STEMPeers Annual Conference 2022

The 2022 STEMPeers Annual Conference was held on October 29 at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP), Roberts Center for Pediatric Research. STEMPeers was formulated in 2015 as a Facebook group when cofounders [Ananda Ghosh](#) and [Abhinav Dey](#) recognized the lack of social and career mentorship platforms for STEM workforce. In 2017, STEMPeers evolved from a virtual group into a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization committed to community building and peer to peer mentoring. This year the in-person conference was attended by 175 registrants, culminating in meaningful interactions, connections and discussions. The event included concurrent sessions with passionate panelists covering topics like careers in academia and industry, academic grant writing, immigration for international candidates, postdoctoral experiences in institutes around the Philly area, careers in non-profit organizations, mental health in STEM, and science communication among others.

JPA members Piyush Mishra and Arijita Ghosh were part of the local organizing committee, and here is an account of the key highlights of the event with some inside-out perspectives.

- Keynote address by Bruce Levine, Barbara and Edward Netter Professor in Cancer Gene Therapy, Abramson Cancer Center, Perelman School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania. Levine drew a comprehensive picture indicating key turning points in the development of cell and gene therapy and sharing stories of how local achievements changed global perceptions and the role of regulatory approvals in that journey.
- Story-telling in science with Vikram Gadagkar, PhD, Assistant Professor in the Department of Neuroscience, Mortimer B. Zuckerman Mind Brain Behavior Institute at Columbia University. Vikram presented his work on communal courtship in the Yellow Wattled Lapwing, a ground-nesting bird, entitled, "The song and dance of neurons," which was followed by a dance recital on learning, performance, and teaching by Sloka Iyengar, PhD, Course Scientist, American Museum of Natural History, NY.
- Our very own Dr. Lisa Kozlowski, Associate Dean for Student & Postdoctoral Affairs, Jefferson College of Life Sciences, informed the attendees about postdoctoral benefits at Jefferson. A representative from the postdoctoral office at CHOP did the same.
- Panelists from big Pharma to recent biotech start-ups discussed diverse career options in R&D industry. They touched upon beyond-the-bench options in industry like business development, market research, and biotech consulting.
- A panel of young investigators delved deeper into do's and don'ts of early careers in academia and the path forward. A fellow peer, Dr. Drishya Kurup, who is currently a Research Instructor at Jefferson, moderated this session.

- Investment bankers, market research analysts, and venture capitalists, who were former biology postdocs, gave insights on how to use transferable skills attained during years in bench science in the world of finance. The concept of biotech equity research was discussed in detail.
- Representatives from the American Association of Cancer Research (AACR) elaborated on the functioning of a successful non-profit organization.
- Entrepreneurs described their journeys mentioning key points on how to keep a startup afloat and run a profitable entity.
- Tracy Costello, PhD, Executive Coach and STEMPeers Gurukool & Professional Development Consultant, conducted a Gurukool workshop: **Beyond Skills**, where she discussed strategies to improve resumes and LinkedIn profiles.
- An academic grant writing workshop was conducted by Jamie Rubin, PhD, Vice Chair for Investigator Development, Professor of Medical Sciences at CUMC, Columbia University. Dr. Rubin discussed insights on how to write successful grant proposals to secure funding.
- Brian Getson, an immigration lawyer at Getson and Schatz P.C., spoke about immigration woes and ways to navigate the process.
- Last but not the least, mental health expert Hyong Un, MD, Chief Medical Officer at Recovery Center of America, spoke at length about challenges affecting mental health of academicians, coping mechanisms, and how to deal with such situations.



The organizing team comprised mostly of local volunteers from institutes around Philly and led by Dr. Arnab China, Senior Scientist at Carisma Therapeutics. The next STEMPeers meeting will be in San Diego tentatively in Sept-Oct 2023.

Around the World social event!

JPA organized a social event called 'Around the World', where students and postdocs were encouraged to represent their country/state/city in ways that they would like. There was food from multiple corners of the world. Many chose to dress up in ethnic attire, participating in fun-filled events throughout the evening. Enjoy the colorful, diverse photos from this exciting event!



Joice, JPA VP Social Affairs, giving out prizes to (L to R) Ankita, winner of the trivia game on famous world landmarks, Saman, winner of the trivia game on flags of countries and Emilia, winner of the trivia game on famous cuisines around the world. Congratulations to all!



The JPA team along with Dr. Lisa Kozlowski, Dawn Berkbigler and Nathan Ryan from GSA in the spirit of the event!



Kristen, JPA Senior VP, giving out prizes to fashion show winners (L to R) **Sruthi** and **Sharath**, **Shamila** and family and **Maunika**. Hearty congratulations to the winners!

Call for Stories for JeffPost:

Postdocs, graduate students, and PIs interested in showcasing the following are encouraged to reach out to JPA:

- Technologies or services in for potential use by postdocs and the research community at Jefferson
- Stories of research/awards from Jefferson laboratories
- Articles/information associated with improving the life of postdocs and students
- Postdoc achievements

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