

Research Retreats: In Search of More Focus

Irene McClay Davis, PT, PhD¹

After sitting through 4 to 5 days of podium presentations and sorting through hundreds of posters, I have often left scientific meetings with a desire for more science relating to my own area of research. By design, this is the nature of these large annual scientific meetings. There is a need for these meetings to be broad and inclusive in order to attract a wide range of scientists. Certainly, the upside of this is that you have the opportunity to be exposed to the most current research in a number of areas that may be peripheral to your own research agenda. Interest groups have emerged in societies such as the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) and the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), which help to provide more focused programming within these large meetings. However, the topic areas are often still fairly broad in nature.

Throughout the 1990s, the Research Section of the APTA has sponsored a number of successful weeklong research retreats on topics including motor control and neural plasticity. Experts in the field were chosen as keynote speakers and research abstracts were solicited from within the scientific community. These retreats were viewed as great forums for rich academic discussions among graduate students, clinicians, and seasoned scientists.

Special interest groups within the sections of the APTA have also initiated these retreats. One of the missions of the newly formed Foot and Ankle Special Interest Group (within the Orthopaedic Section) was to promote research within the interest group. With that goal in mind, plans for a research retreat took shape. This retreat was designed as a 1.5-day meeting in Annapolis, MD, in May 2000 with a very defined focus of "Static and Dynamic Classification of the Foot." As with previous retreats, keynote speakers were invited to present their body of research on the topic. Research abstracts were solicited and underwent peer review to determine their scientific merit and relevance to the retreat. Because of the focus, the meeting was small (30 participants), which fostered an environment for open and stimulating discussions. Some of the abstracts of this meeting were later published in the *JOSPT*.² A second retreat is planned for May 2004 at the University of Southern California. The topic of this retreat is 'Measurement of Foot Motion: Inverse and Forward Dynamic Models.'

An organization or institution with a focused interest can also sponsor research retreats. The abstracts in this issue of the *JOSPT* are from the second research retreat focusing on "ACL Injuries: The Gender Bias." Both meetings were cosponsored by the Kentucky Sports Medicine Center and the Joyner Sportsmedicine Institute and held in Lexington, Kentucky. The first retreat was held in April 2001 and the abstracts were published in *Clinical Biomechanics*.¹ This most recent retreat was held in April 2003, with many of the participants taking part in the first retreat as well. The next ACL retreat is planned for April 2005. At each of these retreats, a consensus statement has been formed based on the current state of research on the topic. As these retreats have had the same focus each time, the progression of the state of thought on factors associated with the gender bias in ACL injuries can be followed. This helps to further direct the future areas of research.

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Physical Therapy, University of Delaware, Newark, DE. Director of Research, Joyner Sportsmedicine Institute, Mechanicsburg, PA.

I have been fortunate to be involved in a number of these research retreats. Seldom do you have the opportunity to sit in a room with the handful of scientists and clinicians who share your research interest. The focus of the retreat keeps the group small and intimate, promoting many enriching discussions. These discussions spill over to the social activities that have included dinners, sailing in the Chesapeake Bay, and outings to the Keeneland horse races. One of the most exciting outcomes of these retreats is the number of doctoral dissertations that have been spawned from ideas generated during the many discussions.

Research retreats offer an excellent alternative, or supplement, to the large-scale scientific meetings. Those in search of more focus should seek out one of these retreats. If there is not one that satisfies your own research interests, consider sponsoring one from your institution or within a section or special interest group of the APTA. To paraphrase one participant's assessment of a recent retreat, "I spent as much time traveling from Australia as I did at the retreat itself, in order to have a focused experience unlike what I have at the large scientific meetings. It was well worth it." This speaks volumes for the value these types of retreats can offer. It is hoped that the abstracts and consensus statements in this current issue of *JOSPT* will assist in providing a model for those interested in organizing future research retreats.

References

1. McClay, IS. Proceedings of the Foot Classification Conference. *J Ortho Sports Phys Ther.* 2001;31(3): 154-160.
2. McClay Davis I, Ireland ML. The Gender Bias in ACL Injuries: A Research Retreat. *Clin Biomech.* 2001;16:937-939.