Last month marked ASN’s annual Kidney Week conference, the premier gathering for ASN, bringing together approximately 12,000 health care professionals, including a substantial representation of trainees who embody the future of nephrology. The opening plenary speech by ASN President Michelle A. Josephson, MD, FASN, emphasized “workforce training” as one of ASN's three future priorities.

Ahead of Kidney Week, trainees participated in a series of polls posted on X (formerly known as Twitter) run by Kidney News’ editorial fellows to discuss their expectations for the conference. In the initial survey, which received 84 votes, 47.6% of trainees said that networking would be their main expectation, followed by new research (23.8%) and skill development (21.4%). Of the respondents, 7.1% said that their main expectation was to collaborate.

As Kidney News’ editorial fellows, we reached out to trainees from different levels to gauge their experiences of Kidney Week 2023.

We asked Christina Tamargo, MD, PGY-3, at Johns Hopkins University and current applicant to the Nephrology Match, about her Kidney Week experiences. Per Tamargo, “The conference was very useful in preparing me for the upcoming match and a career in nephrology. First, it allowed me opportunities to connect with people in the field, particularly people working on research and clinical care in areas that interest me and at institutions I am considering for fellowship. Second, I learned infinite clinical pearls and left the conference feeling much better informed about the state of nephrology and the latest research. Finally, it got me even more excited about nephrology—it was inspiring being around so many people so passionate about the kidney! I would recommend Kidney Week to anyone strongly considering a career in nephrology.”

Joseph Wahba is an undergraduate student at the University of Pennsylvania who gave an oral presentation on exploring unconscious bias in peer-to-peer interactions at medical conferences. According to Wahba, “As a pre-med student, it felt wonderful to share my research with those in the medical field in such a prestigious setting. It was great to contribute and be part of an event [in which] like-minded individuals and firms come together to learn and share fascinating discoveries within our field. [At ASN Kidney Week], I got a glimpse [of an] exciting future that was potentially in store for me and is certainly a motivator for me to continue pursuing my professional goals.”

Christopher Gitter, BS in Pharmacology and Toxicology, a third-year medical student at the Medical College of Wisconsin, participated in the ASN Kidney Students and Residents (STARS) program, which is designed to stimulate nephrology interest among medical students, residents, and graduate students. Gitter shared, “ASN Kidney Week allowed me to connect key care dilemmas and novel treatments in the hospital to leading research in nephrology across the country. ASN’s Kidney STARS program gives structure to a vast conference from the medical student perspective and excels at facilitating networking opportunities for trainees. Specifically, [its] recommended ‘Trainee Track’ helped guide my choice of sessions to attend throughout the week and glean meaningful clinical pearls.”

Ritu Seethapathy, MD, a second-year resident at New York Medical College/Landmark Medical Center and ASN Kidney STARS program participant at Kidney Week, noted that “Kidney Week can be overwhelming to any novice,” but the STARS program “provided a structure to the madness, in addition to the opportunity to meet mentors and fellow kidney enthusiasts.” Witnessing passionate debates among top nephrologists was a unique experience at Kidney Week 2023, in addition to the unveiling of groundbreaking advances in nephrology. Seethapathy also noted how the farewell STARS luncheon, featuring patient perspectives, grounded attendees in the reality of their work. According to Seethapathy, amidst the challenging task of choosing sessions, the conference’s real value lies in the connections forged. The welcoming atmosphere and mentorship, exemplified by Kidney STARS mentors, make it a pivotal event for those considering a career in nephrology. The career guidance panel, she noted, was a boon for aspiring nephrologists. “ASN Kidney Week helped tremendously in cementing my interest in the field.”

Current nephrology fellows in programs around the country also found the conference useful in navigating potential job opportunities. Omar Osman, MD, is chief fellow at the Cleveland Clinic, and he reported, “Didactics are always great to catch up on cutting-edge data and visions for the future, but for fellows in their first or second year, I think having a physical space to meet with future employers or recruiters is of great value and expedites the process of planning your career once training is done. It’s also a great place to catch up with friends and always fun to see a new city every Kidney Week!”

“Since my second year of graduate training in 2016, attending ASN’s annual Kidney Week has been pivotal in shaping my career in nutrition, research, and kidney-focused work,” reflected Luis Perez, PhD, RD, with Veterans Affairs. Describing the significance of Kidney Week, Perez noted, “For my first attendance year, fortunately, Kidney Week was close to my training school at the University of Illinois.” The second year Perez was supported by university travel funds and awards, and in 2018, Perez earned his first Kidney STARS travel support and program participation. Expressing gratitude, Perez emphasized, “It is without a doubt an exceptional
program that has helped me every step along my journey and career.” As Perez progressed, ASN pipeline training programs continued to provide invaluable support, culminating in being chosen to speak at a Kidney Week STARS graduate student career panel. He shared, “My participation was particularly significant because I once stood in the same position as the attendees, having been a STARS attendee and trainee myself.” Perez underscored the impact of mentorship at Kidney Week, as well as the relevance of poster and oral abstract sessions as a highlight of attendance. Lastly, he expressed a desire for more mentoring sessions and workshop opportunities at Kidney Week, emphasizing the value of one-on-one conversations and personalized advice for trainees.

ASN Kidney Week 2023 stands out as a pivotal event that not only provides a platform for academic exchange but also nurtures enthusiasm, fosters connections, and shapes the future of nephrology. The diverse experiences shared by attendees underscore the conference’s multidimensional impact, making it imperative for ASN to continue expanding exposure opportunities for trainees. As the conference solidifies interests and fosters connections, it remains a vital force in advancing the field of nephrology through education, collaboration, and inspiration. Looking forward, the emphasis on mentorship and personalized advice, as expressed by Perez, suggests a potential avenue for further enhancement of the conference’s impact on the careers of aspiring nephrologists.

Paul Hanna, MD, MSc, is the Director of Nephrology at the Division of Nephrology, Department of Medicine, Medical College of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Rasha Radan, MD, is with the Division of Nephrology, Department of Medicine, Duke University Hospital, Durham, NC.

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

By Terrence Jay O’Neil

What a marvelous time to be a nephrologist as we stand at a crossroads in end stage kidney disease care. The old technology—dialysis—a life-saving application of a ridiculously simple principle of physics, can be further refined into implantable devices that provide some but not all of the benefits of functioning kidneys. Complex machines incapable of healing from damage, they only become affordable at an enormous scale. As discussed in the October/November issue of Kidney News (1) and other recently published articles (2–5), a new biological technology, using pig tissue genetically engineered to evade human immune trip-wires, is real kidney tissue, theoretically able to perform all of the functions of a human kidney. It is also initially hugely expensive but self-replicating and likely scaling to affordability quite rapidly. Yes, there are risks of endogenous retroviruses, and the melange of hormones and other effectors it makes is not human, with inherent risks of dysregulation of the multiple metabolic pathways in which human kidneys participate.

Must we choose one over the other? Not necessarily. We will likely need both approaches because for various reasons, not every patient will find one or the other optimal. But now we are Dawning alternatives to a lifetime of hemodialysis or peritoneal dialysis and the chronic shortage of human homografts. I say again, what a marvelous time to be a nephrologist!

Terrence Jay O’Neil, MD, FACP, FASN, Col USAF MC (Ret), is president of HD Clean LLC, specializing in development of dialysis safety devices and education for patients at-risk for progressive chronic kidney disease. He serves as a member of the ASN Quality Committee.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in Letters to the Editor are those of the individuals and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of the entities they represent.

References


Do you have an opinion about a story published in *Kidney News*? Submit a brief Letter to the Editor! Letters will be considered for publication in an upcoming issue. Email kidneynews@asn-online.org to submit.