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Title:

Fostering networking opportunities and creating a community of early and mid-career clinicians and researchers within the International Society for Bipolar Disorders.

Commentary:

The International Society for Bipolar Disorders (ISBD) recognizes that empowering the next generation of professionals focused on bipolar disorder is critical for both the scientific progress of the discipline but also its survival as an organization. The Early and Mid-Career Committee (EMCC) was established to provide a platform from which the ISBD could nurture and support the career development of clinicians and researchers working in this space (Huber et al, 2022).

The recent EMCC-led *Needs Assessment* survey, which was targeted at early and mid-career (EMC) professionals, highlighted that both EMC clinicians *and* researchers place great importance on the development of meaningful collaborations with peers and other professionals in the field (Sperry et al, 2023). Most survey respondents reported actively trying to establish collaborations within their departments and with partners in other institutions and networking during conferences and presentations. Commonly reported facilitators of successful collaborations included i) the existence of opportunities for networking, including via social media, conferences, and committees; ii) the availability of supportive mentors that encouraged and facilitated the establishment of collaborations and iii) pleasurable interpersonal interactions with other professionals that cultivated a positive collaborative relationship.

The Needs Assessment provided an impetus for strategizing about initiatives that might be implemented by the EMCC to foster networking opportunities and collaborations among EMC clinicians and researchers, their peers, and senior colleagues (Douglas et al, 2023). A recent polling conducted by the EMCC to rank potential EMC-focused networking initiatives identified three key priorities that are discussed below.

1. *Establishment of an online community to facilitate collaborations and provide educational opportunities*: To address this the EMCC will endeavor to create a virtual hub where professionals can connect and interact with colleagues from all over the world. Such an initiative will reduce barriers and make education and collaboration possible regardless of location or schedule. The digital format will allow multiple activities including live webinars and “hangouts” but also

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asynchronous access to discussion forums, blog posts and educational materials developed for and shared by EMC clinicians and researchers.

2. *Establishment of travel grants to attend the ISBD Annual Conference*: EMC clinicians and researchers may struggle with financial hardships that prevent them from attending in-person conferences, presenting their results, participating in educational activities, and engaging in networking with their peers and senior colleagues. Travel grants and awards are important tools to democratize access to the main discussion and educational forum in our field, the Annual Conference. As a complement to the Samuel Gershon Junior Investigator Award, the ISBD EMCC will work toward expanding the number of travel awards to trainees and EMC clinicians and researchers. An equitable program focusing on underrepresented groups and individuals from low- and mid-income countries should promote diversity and inclusion with the goal of strengthening the global nature or our Society.

3. *Offering networking sessions at conferences/meetings*: The EMCC will continue to advocate for EMC representation as well as organize and promote dedicated EMC symposiums and EMC-targeted workshops, panels and seminars at the Annual Conference, ISBD Chapter Meetings, and standalone virtual and in-person sessions, where peer-networking may naturally occur. EMC-focused 'speed-dating' type networking events could also be considered as a means of fostering collaborative activities.

The future activities of the EMCC will be guided by the aforementioned priorities, which provide a tenable framework to support the needs of EMC clinicians and researchers focused on bipolar disorder. These activities will prioritize the inclusion of individuals of diverse backgrounds to foster networking in underdeveloped areas, such as in the Global South, as a means of mitigating inequality and reducing disparities in line with the guiding principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Although some initiatives, such as advocating for more representation and dedicated activities in scientific meetings are already in place and are part of the EMCC mission, the implementation of initiatives to address other priorities may take more time and effort. For instance, there will likely be financial barriers within the ISBD to expand travel funding for EMC members, so establishing new and creative partnerships with funding agencies and industry and offering a hybrid model that allows online participation and networking during the Annual Conference might be warranted. That said, as ISBD already promotes online activities there should be virtually no barriers to adapt the existing digital infrastructure and expertise to establish an online community connecting new and existing EMC members.

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The EMCC recognizes that networking and collaboration are a critical means to enable innovative solutions to difficult problems. Fostering networking and collaboration is a priority of the EMCC, and the initiatives that will be executed to address this priority will undoubtedly better position EMC professionals focused on bipolar disorder to make progress in the field.

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