

## **September 2023 – MARC PhD Network: Career advice interview with Dr Louisa Picco**

The MARC PhD Network asks Louisa Picco, Former MARC PhD Network Chair and recent recipient of the 2022 MARC Best PhD publication prize, questions about her experiences as a PhD student and early researcher career.

### **Tell us a little about yourself. What was your PhD project, what are your research areas of interests, and the projects you're currently involved with?**

I completed my PhD in 2022, and this related to identifying and responding to prescription opioid related risks, using two well adopted approaches – prescription drug monitoring programs and clinical screening tools. It explored how pharmacists use these tools to make clinical decisions and compared people that were identified as at risk between these approaches to determine whether there was concordance. The research was quite timely as during my PhD, Victoria implemented its state-based prescription drug monitoring program, and was the first Australian jurisdiction to mandate use of these programs, so I was really interested to know more about this new program and how its use informed clinical decision making.

Since then, I have been fortunate enough to secure a NHMRC Emerging Leader grant to extend this work and I am currently exploring the impact of prescription drug monitoring programs across other Australian jurisdictions, from both a prescriber and pharmacist perspective. I also plan to identify both patient and population level outcomes of these programs.

### **What resources were the most helpful to you as a PhD student in addiction-related research?**

I did the majority of my PhD during the COVID-19 pandemic, so online resources were essential. The lack of opportunities to interact, network and share experiences with fellow students and other researchers face-to-face was both challenging and isolating at times. This is where the Monash Addiction Research Centre (MARC) PhD network really helped. It was a platform for students, all undertaking addiction-related research across Monash Uni to be connected. This occurred in many ways including receiving the MARC newsletters, which showcased the breadth of MARC's work across Monash, including that of PhD students. There

were also various opportunities to participate in trainings or webinars, specific to addiction-related research, as well online events specifically for PhD students and early career researchers such as grant writing workshops and 'shut up and write' sessions.

I also found the range of online courses through myDevelopment at Monash to be a really useful resource- these were quite broad in nature, however, were extremely helpful for specific topics such as introductory courses to analytical software, types of analysis and also courses on effective writing skills for your PhD and peer reviewed manuscripts.

### **What challenges in addiction-related research have you encountered and how did you overcome them?**

I think many of the challenges I have encountered are not addiction specific but more broadly related to the field of research. For example, the process of getting articles published is not always straightforward- often these can be rejected by numerous journals before they are accepted. This process can be disheartening and demoralising at times. However, it can also be a useful process- for example, you can get really insightful feedback that can strengthen your manuscript for the subsequent submission. One thing I have learnt is there will always be a 'home' for your manuscript, it is just a matter of finding it! So, this may include thinking beyond addiction specific journals to other fields; for example, as my PhD focused on pharmacists' experiences of prescription drug monitoring programs, so therefore I published some articles in pharmacy journals.

### **Do have any suggestions for PhD students wanting to plan their career whilst studying?**

If you wanting to have a career in research or academia, following your PhD, I would recommend getting as much exposure and experience prior to (if it is not too late!) and during your PhD. Opportunities to be involved with research early on will provide both exposure to a range of research studies but also help identify particular areas or methodologies of interest. This may be in the form of submitting ethics, contributing to data collection and data analysis but also, where possible, thinking about key performance indicators or outcomes which set you apart from other students. For example, if the opportunity arises to be involved with or even be the first author or peer reviewed papers.

Another great opportunity is to be a reviewer for journals – this is a great way to critique other researcher's work. These skills can help when thinking about your own research and related manuscripts, but also provide learning opportunities and ideas for future research you may wish to undertake.

### **What aspects of your early career as a research fellow did you not anticipate?**

As an early career researcher, who is still quite new to addiction-related research, I am still learning so much each day. I think it is important to remember that you can't know everything! This highlights the importance of being part of a research team, consisting of people with a range of different strengths, which you can tap into and who will support you. This is something you should not underestimate.

I am grateful for opportunities presented to me, so early in my post-doctoral career; like contributing to and being named on grants, mentoring students and more junior staff, and being invited to be an Editor for a journal. Research is very diverse in terms of the tasks and responsibilities which can be expected, and this is something I didn't initially anticipate.

### **Do you have any advice about networking and promoting collaborative approaches to research?**

Conferences can be great for this but equally overwhelming when you are first starting out. For people specifically interested in addiction-related research, the APSAD conference is a fabulous local conference. I attended this for the first time in person last year and found this to be a great place to meet other people working in the addiction space, many whose names I knew but had never met. They also have an early career researcher breakfast, as part of the conference, which brought together other researchers at similar stages of their career, so if you do attend APSAD, I highly recommend going to this. I have observed that the addiction field is quite small and everyone seems to know everyone, which is really nice, so conferences like this are a great place to start having conversations with people and fostering collaborations. Other opportunities may include joining conference committees, early career research groups, or institution-based groups or committees.

Finally, I have been extremely fortunate to have an incredibly supportive supervisor and mentor, Professor Suzi Nielsen, who has worked in the field for over 20 years and has established an extensive global network, particularly in relation to identifying and responding to opioid related harms. It is through her well-established network, that she has introduced me to various researchers and clinicians locally and internationally, working in this same space. This has led to future collaborations and opportunities for me and highlights the importance of having a supportive mentor who provides you with invaluable opportunities to collaborate with researchers in a similar discipline and this is something I am so grateful to have had.

**Who would you recommend undertake post-doctoral studies, and what are the advantages/disadvantages of completing post-doctoral studies?**

Prior to undertaking my PhD, this was something I had thought about for a long time. One of the reasons I didn't commit to this earlier was the challenge of identifying a topic that I was both passionate about but also that would sustain my interest, given the period of time it takes to complete a PhD, and therefore this was not something I wanted to rush into. For me personally, my post-doctoral work has built on my PhD research and therefore trying to identify an area or field you want to focus on can be challenging. That is not to say that you can't change disciplines, or research fields, however, trying to build a track record relating to a particular field is important.

For example, this is important when applying for funding, as you need to showcase your work. Most post-doctoral roles revolve around funding, either that you have personally secured or that maybe your mentor or broader team has secured and these funding opportunities are extremely competitive and often only fund a small percentage of all applications. These are challenges but also things to be aware of as you think about and how you can build a track record

**Is there any other advice you'd offer to PhD candidates interested in post-doctoral studies?**

I would try and align yourself with a team of researchers that have similar interests and goals- this can often be easier said than done though. This relates to my earlier comments about the importance of networking, collaborations and having a mentor to guide you along your post-doctoral career but also someone who will put you forward and push you outside your comfort zone. Exposure is key, so jump at any opportunity that presents and don't be scared to give something a go!