CONFERENCE REPORT

South African Neuropsychological Association (SACNA) 12th Biennial Conference, Indaba Hotel, Fourways, Johannesburg, 10 to 12 March 2010

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The First South African Neuropsychology Conference was held in Durban in 1981 (Watts, 2008). This was a significant event that made the field of neuropsychology ‘visible’ as well as allowing professionals who share similar interests to meet and co-operate. This conference subsequently became a biennial event, with the South African Clinical Neuropsychological Association (SACNA) having been founded at the third conference in 1985. This year, 2010, saw the hosting of the three day long 12th Biennial Conference by SACNA.

A host of international experts have presented at these conferences, including such doyens as Kevin Walsh (1989), Muriel Lezak (1991), and Donald Stuss (2003), amongst many others (Watts, 2008). The 12th Conference was no exception to this trend and included Canadian neuropsychologist, Bryan Kolb, who along with Ian Whishaw is one of the authors of *Fundamentals of Human Neuropsychology*, one of the core texts that applicants are encouraged to refer to when preparing for the SACNA credentialing examination. Kolb presented several engaging and relevant seminars including one that focussed on the exciting topic of neuro-plasticity and the development of strategies for effective rehabilitation.

The above represents what is for me a particularly positive tradition of the SACNA conferences: many of the invited experts present more than one seminar which tend to be of considerable length. Furthermore it is common for the conference to feature more than one such expert, from both local and international sites. The 2010 conference, for example, included presentations by local psychiatrist, Merryl Vorster, who drew on her more than considerable expertise in discussing the omnipresent ethical dimension of neuropsychological assessment, as well as Wim Verbeek, a Dutch psychiatrist, who tackled the ethics of emerging bio-technologies.
This mixture of diversity and duration thus allowed for a potent learning experience, something of importance for those fascinated with the field as well as those of us living in the world of continuing professional development (CPD).

The highlight of the conference was undoubtedly the three presentations by professor Sergio Della Sala from the University of Edinburgh. Della Sala demonstrated both a superb knowledge of his field as well as a great capacity for entertaining his audience. Included in his presentations was the issue of free will (or, as he calls it, ‘free don’t’) that included a fascinating discussion on the phenomenon of anarchic hand syndrome, the assessment of Alzheimer’s dementia, and a hilarious, though sobering, presentation on the use and abuse of neuroscientific knowledge in the public domain.

Another tradition that continued at this year’s conference was the presentation of research by various students. Students from the University of Cape Town, University of South Africa, Stellenbosch University, and the University of the Witwatersrand presented various interesting studies that consistently demonstrated a sophisticated understanding and use of research methodology. Ann Edwards and her students from Rhodes University presented normative data for various tests used in neuropsychological assessment. This was of a very high standard, was particularly well received and went some way to addressing the dire need for relevant normative data in the South African context.

The conference closed with a workshop by Barbara Donaldson and Brain Mallinson, two stalwarts of the neuropsychology movement in South Africa. This event proved to be indispensable as they carefully laid out the process, dangers and ‘must-do’s’ of medico-legal work. For me their contribution represented the generosity that has played a vital role in the development of neuropsychology in South Africa.

As can be concluded from the above, this year’s SACNA conference was well worth attending and provided this attendee with much needed knowledge, discussion and camaraderie. It was however not all warm and fuzzy as a presentation on the finalisation by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) of the Masters degree in Neuropsychology indicated that a long road still lies ahead. Finally, the conference remains expensive, possibly unavoidable when presenting such a high quality event, but which unfortunately excludes those without adequate funding or solid bank balances.
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Clifford van Ommen is a senior lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Rhodes University. His research interests include critical neuroscience and the development of local normative data for neuropsychological tests. He is a clandestine metalhead.

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