
Summer 2020

ASP Diversity and Inclusion Committee Call to Action

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American Society of Pharmacognosy

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Discovering
Nature's
Molecular
Potential

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In Memoriam: Mansukh C. Wani



Dr. Mansukh C. Wani

By Nicholas Oberlies, PhD

It is with a heavy heart that I report on the passing of Dr. Mansukh C. Wani on April 11, 2020 at the age of 95. To the natural products community, he is most well known as the co-discoverer of taxol, which was first isolated from the bark of the Pacific yew tree, *Taxus brevifolia*.¹ If that singular achievement were not enough, he and his colleague of nearly 40 years, the late Dr. Monroe Wall, also co-discovered camptothecin from the Chinese tree *Camptotheca acuminata*.² That discovery led to two cancer drugs, topotecan and irinotecan, in the 1990s, which are analogues that circumvent the solubility problems of the isolated natural prod-

uct. It is extremely challenging to place formal metrics on either of those discoveries. They led to multi-billion-dollar drugs. They have been used in the treatments of millions of cancer patients. Those original publications have spawned thousands of research projects. They are evidence on the value of nature to help mitigate human disease. In fact, if the cancer arena were not large enough, taxol is even used to coat stents, mitigating heart disease by preventing restenosis in arteries.³

When the news started circulating of Dr. Wani's death, many people commented on what a hero he was to several generations of scientists. The work of Wall and Wani is often characterized as a dynamic duo, as it is so rare to discover one compound from nature that becomes a drug, discovering two seems nearly superhuman. I had the distinct honor of working with Dr. Wani for over two decades, often traveling with him to

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ASP Diversity and Inclusion Committee Call to Action

The goal of the ASP Diversity and Inclusion Committee is to foster a diverse, inclusive, and equitable community within the ASP. We, the members of this committee, explicitly state that BLACK LIVES MATTER. To our Black students, colleagues, and friends, we see you, we support you, we value you, and we commit to doing better to make the ASP a more equitable environment. As pledged in the ASP's recent statement in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, the Diversity Committee is providing concrete actions and



resources to address structural racism within our organization. We ask all members to join us in taking action to support people of color in our professional and personal communities. This work will not be easy, and it will not be comfortable. It will take more than an afternoon webinar or a single conversation to deconstruct advantages that have been engineered over the decades. At this crucial moment in time, we must be intentional with both our words and actions. Our impact as individuals and as a society can be powerful.

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Here we offer the first steps for members to take and summarize several initiatives that our committee is championing.

A FEW FIRST STEPS YOU CAN TAKE

1 If you are a group leader, complete this form: forms.gle/LKKfApe3caxJjnCT6 (it only takes about three minutes!) by providing information about your research interests and location. Graduate students and postdocs, encourage your PIs to complete it as well. The data will be entered into a map that will be available on the ASP's website to help match prospective students with appropriate graduate programs in pharmacognosy, natural products, and related disciplines. This map, which was created by ASP members Brian Murphy and Chase Clark (with financial support from the ASP) as part of our effort to educate the community about research opportunities in the field of natural products, will be a critical resource to ASP ambassadors as we build bridges to marginalized or underrepresented communities.

2 Have a conversation with your lab group about creating an inclusive lab environment. Such a conversation can be initiated by group leaders or group members. We recommend making sure that in such conversations all group members are allowed to contribute, i.e. by specifically going around the room (or zoom) and giving each person the floor, one by one. Listening is key. You might choose an article to assign for such conversations. Here are some resources:

www.pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acscentsci.0c00784

www.academics4blacklives.com/

www.pnas.org/content/117/17/9284

www.chronicle.com/article/I-Was-Fed-Up-How/248955

3 Donate funds. We are preparing to launch an undergraduate summer research assistantship program to increase the representation of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) (including members of the LatinX, Black, African American and Native American communities) in the field of scientific research related to natural products. This program will fund summer research experiences for students from groups that have historically been underrepresented in our membership. In designing this program, we recognize the interconnectedness of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender and will seek particularly to support those who may be dis-

advantaged or underrepresented as a result of intersectionalities, such as BIPOC students who are also women, economically disadvantaged, or LGBTQIA+. Details on how to donate to this fund will be provided shortly.

ACTIONS BEING TAKEN BY THE ASP DIVERSITY COMMITTEE

The ASP Diversity Committee, which has been active since 2018, is working on initiatives related to three major goals: (1) build the pipeline that overcomes structural barriers of entry for underrepresented groups wishing to engage in natural products research, (2) work with members of the ASP to create a more equitable, inclusive, and supportive community, (3) recognize and highlight the contributions that members from underrepresented communities make to the ASP. Some of these programs are already underway (i.e. the ASP Ambassador's Program), others are still in the planning stages.

1. Build a Pipeline to Overcome Structural Barriers of Entry

a. At the ASP Meeting in the Summer of 2019 (Madison, Wisconsin) we launched the ASP Ambassador's Program. Three ASP Ambassadors (Drs. Christine Salomon, Katherine Zink, and Sandra Loesgen) were appointed and are working (with support from the ASP) to increase participation of individuals from underrepresented groups in our society. For more about this program, see Brian Murphy's article (www.pharmacognosy.us/wp-content/uploads/ASP-Newsletter-55_3.pdf).

b. We launched the Natural Products Career Locator App, an interface that provides resources for students to research natural products-related programs in their area of interest: www.pharmacognosy.us/natural-product-programs-and-research/.

c. We are preparing to launch a new summer undergraduate research program as described above to provide BIPOC individuals equitable opportunities to advance their careers in the ASP.

2. Create an Equitable Community/Educate

a. We plan to work with the ASP Executive Committee and the ASP Foundation to create a new award for ASP members who have demonstrated an outstanding track record for mentorship.

b. We plan to include a panel as part of the ASP webinar series that will discuss creating inclusive lab environments.



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- c. We worked with organizers of the meeting in Madison, Wisconsin to provide a workshop, “Breaking the Bias Habit” by Jennifer Sheridan (Women in Science Leadership Institute, University of Wisconsin – Madison). The workshop was well attended and received by our membership, and we plan to work with ASP members to provide similar programming at future meetings. Please share programming ideas you may have!
- d. For the ASP meeting in Madison, WI, we drafted and introduced a new anti-harassment policy that has now been adopted by the Society (www.aspmeetings.pharmacognosy.us/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/ASP-Code-of-Conduct.pdf).

3. Recognize and Highlight Contributions from Underrepresented Groups

- a. We are seeking to increase the number of undergraduates and graduates from underrepresented groups who receive travel funding to present at ASP meetings.
- b. We are working with Edward Kennelly, editor of the ASP Newsletter, to regularly highlight the contributions of underrepresented groups to the ASP. We will provide educational materials and direction for members seeking to become more involved in our efforts to create a more just and equitable society as part of a new regular column, “Taking Action: Addressing Racism and Inequity in Science.” Anyone interested in writing for the ASP newsletter should contact Dr. Kennelly at asp.newsletter@lehman.cuny.edu.
- c. The ASP Diversity Committee is working with conference organizers to ensure that the presenters at ASP meetings include sufficient representation of women, people of color, and others from historically underrepresented groups. We welcome suggestions for speakers at future meetings!

We, the ASP Diversity and Inclusion Committee Members and the ASP Ambassadors, endorse the ideas and actions presented in this article and look forward to partnering with our members to bring them to fruition. We would also love to hear your ideas and welcome you to reach out to us.

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