

# Insights from the Network

## Reflections from trainees at their first in-person Till & McCulloch Meetings

By Tyler Wenzel

Conferences can be a life-changing experience for trainees that complements their graduate program. At the same time, these events pull trainees out of the safety of their home laboratory and into an unfamiliar environment that can cause discomfort.



**“I can wholeheartedly admit that TMM was one of my favourite memories of 2022. It was ... unforgettable, involving job offers, research opportunities and, importantly, new friends.” – Jennifer Le, Master’s student**

The Till & McCulloch Meetings (TMM) are Canada’s largest conference for research on stem cells and regenerative medicine and, on paper, have all the ingredients to be intimidating. Year after year, attendees—and especially trainees—new to the TMM experience are pleasantly surprised that TMM turns out to be a highlight of their scientific career. In case you do not believe us, we asked trainees to share their experience of attending their first TMM in-person and provide tips to trainees looking to get the most out of their time at the conference. Let’s see what they have to say!

### **Attend as many events as possible, especially the trainee events!**

Attendees have the option to attend a wide range of events that cover a variety of topics, tissue types, and diseases. There are many different ways to occupy your time, but trainees recommend focusing on the free small-group activities for trainees, such as the pre-conference workshops, the ‘ethical, legal and social issues’ (ELSI) event, and the ‘meet the experts’ luncheon. They feel these events gave them the opportunity to network with peers outside their laboratory and break up the informational overload that can come from listening to many lectures.



**“I highly encourage trainees to attend the pre-conference workshops. It helps set the tone of the conference and fine-tune your introductions before meeting with potential supervisors and industry recruiters.”**

The pre-conference workshops, which occur the day before the conference officially starts, were a highlight. Not only were they informative, but they also gave trainees the opportunity to build relationships with researchers from other teams.

**“To get the most out of TMM, plan in advance which events you want to attend. Events are free, but some require preregistration and will reach capacity several weeks before the conference starts.” – Oreoluwa Kolade, Ph.D. Candidate**

“I was a nervous wreck,” Jennifer Le said. She informed me that this was her first conference experience, and she could feel her anxiety grow as the meeting date approached. “The pre-conference workshops helped set the tone of the conference,” Jennifer explained. The experience calmed her nerves as she became friends with people that were not just her senior lab members; “we often went to dinner together or explored the city in the evenings.”



She also mentioned that the pre-conference workshops ended up being more useful for her career than she anticipated; “[it allowed me to] fine tune [my] introductions before meeting with potential supervisors and industry recruiters.” She told me that she met with several company recruiters throughout the conference and a principal investigator who she was interested in working with after finishing her master’s program.



Oreoluwa Kolade agreed, “the events provide ample opportunity for networking with industry professionals, government representatives, and academic peers.” Oreoluwa further added, “to get the most out of TMM, plan in advance which events you want to attend.” Oreoluwa hits on a great point. While the events at TMM are free, some require preregistration, so it is beneficial to preplan. The pre-conference workshops, ELSI event, and the ‘meet the experts’ luncheon have historically reached capacity several weeks before TMM starts.

**“You never know who you’ll meet at TMM. They could be a lab technician with similar interests or the VP of Product Development at STEMCELL Technologies... always be ready to exchange contact information.” – Jennifer Le, Master’s student**

Principal investigators (PIs) should be aware of these free trainee events, and encourage their trainees to attend, as they are clearly beneficial not only in terms of career progression but also in allowing trainees to meet people early on. Then at the opening reception, they can talk with people they’ve already met, reducing some potential anxiety around attending the conference. When budgeting travel costs, be aware that the pre-conference workshops begin on the Sunday before the official start date of TMM, so trainees will need an extra day of accommodations if travelling from out-of-town.

### **Socialize whenever, wherever!**

TMM is a fascinating conference because a primary focus is talent recruitment; there were many attendees—from academia and industry—wearing ‘I am hiring’ or ‘hire me’ badges. I would have loved these badges at my first conferences, as I recall having no idea what I would do after finishing my graduate degree.



You never know who you'll meet at TMM," Jennifer Le said, "they could be a lab technician with a similar interest as yours or even the VP of Product Development at STEMCELL Technologies, Sharon Louis, who I had the pleasure of speaking with at my poster." Jennifer was glad she got the chance to tell others about her research at the pre-conference workshops, as it made this interaction much less intimidating. "Who knows, the person at your breakfast table could even offer you a job!" Jennifer added, "always be ready to exchange contact information with everyone you meet."

**"It is a gathering of like-minded individuals to congregate and celebrate the remarkable research discovered throughout the year." – Jennifer Le, Master's student**



### **Enjoy Yourself!**

As I ended my conversation with Jennifer, she summarized her TMM experience:

"With that all said, TMM is not made to stress anyone out or put pressure on trainees. It is a gathering of like-minded individuals to congregate and celebrate the remarkable research discovered throughout the year. Enjoy yourself! Take advantage of the catering,

immerse yourself in the discussions at breakout sessions, and recap your day with your lab group or new colleagues you've just met later in the evening.

I can wholeheartedly admit that attending TMM is one of my favourite memories of 2022, as a graduate student and in general. It was ... unforgettable, involving job offers, research opportunities and, importantly, new friends.”



TMM is a different type of conference; a gem for Canadian research. Out of all the different conferences I have been to, I must admit that TMM 2022 stands out in my mind. When I first heard Kevin Robb’s (Vice Chair, Trainee Communications Committee, 2022) excitement surrounding TMM, I was reserved. I have been to dozens of conferences, so I could not comprehend how this event could be particularly special. But, by the time the last day came around, I understood why TMM was special, at least in my own way.

**“[TMM] kept me engaged the entire time, [as it] offers more than just a series of lectures on niche topics.”**

I have never been to a conference that kept me engaged the entire time. This may be because researchers at TMM are extraordinarily passionate about their research projects. It may be because stem cells themselves are an awe-inspiring tool. It may also be because I already had a support system going into the conference with the Trainee Communications Committee. While these factors undoubtedly contributed to my joy, I think the piece that makes TMM stand out is the obvious care that went into planning the conference. Let me try to explain.

TMM offers more than just a series of lectures on niche topics. So, if you’re like me and get restless sitting for hours at a time, there was always an activity waiting around the corner that was more interactive. As someone who has difficulty focusing, this helped pull me back into a state where I was ready to learn. As someone who used to teach grade school, I appreciated that there was clear respect for the education theory that attention begins to drop after a half-hour of listening. I was never bored or felt a desire to leave early.



For example, after listening to a series of talks, I went to the ELSI workshop, which involved small group discussions with experts in clinical research, stem cell policy research, and sex-and-gender research.

These discussions did not follow a strict formula, and thus groups had ample opportunity to steer the conversation into their own areas of interest. Based on the panel discussion that closed the ELSI workshop, no two tables discussed the exact same topics!

Furthermore, the events at TMM and its attendees also constantly reinforced impact, which made it easy for me to understand what problems are trying to be solved with stem cells. Even if I was not familiar with the topic, I could go up to a poster assured that the presenter would be able to articulate why the research was being done and why the experiment was designed in a particular way. This should not be confused with a lack of foundational science researchers at this conference, as there were plenty, but simply that, again, a lot of thought was put into what was being presented at the conference. The questions ‘So what?’ and ‘Why?’ never hung in my mind.

**“It is clearly more than an event to simply share what you have been grinding away at in your laboratory. There are opportunities here to set up the next stage in your career.”**



TMM has everything I want in a conference atmosphere: the ability to learn, network, and make new friends. I am glad I am not alone in this; these three themes seem to be why others look forward to attending TMM year after year. Based on my colleagues getting job offers through TMM, it is clearly more than an event to simply share what you have been grinding away at in your laboratory. There are opportunities here to set up the next stage in your career.

So, like Kevin Robb, I find myself counting down the days until TMM 2023, as I know it will be a welcomed break from my gruelling laboratory work. I encourage anyone to experience as much as they can, and—if you are a trainee and going alone—I encourage you to attend the pre-conference workshops where you can find a cohort to experience TMM with. If that seems overwhelming, reach out to the members of the 2023 Training Communications Committee—we always look forward to meeting people and will probably invite you to breakfast (it's free, by the way).

[TMM 2023](#) and its [pre-conference workshops](#) are in Toronto this year (October 22-25) at the Westin Harbour Castle. I have no idea what I will experience this year, but I, at the very least, hope to meet you.



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