Marilyn B. Benoit, MD, Child Maltreatment Mentorship Award Recap

Julianna Finelli, MD, and Charles Zeanah, MD

As the 2019 recipient of the award, I had the opportunity to work with Charles Zeanah, MD, Vice Chair for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the Tulane University School of Medicine and Director of the Institute of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health, to develop a “cross-cultural” training curriculum in child maltreatment for psychiatry residents and child psychiatry fellows. The project was inspired by the idea that by better-understanding the various systems serving maltreated children and their families, psychiatrists can become more effective advocates for this vulnerable population.

With high rates of mental-health-service-use among the child welfare population (McMillen et al., 2007), concerns about the quality of mental health treatment – including limited access to evidence-based interventions and overuse of psychotropic medications (Zeanah & Humphreys, 2018; Zeanah, Finelli & Gleason, 2019) – clearly point to the need for quality psychiatric care. Furthermore, psychiatrists are particularly well suited to integrate neurobiological, cognitive, and socio-emotional developmental perspectives in guiding intervention and placement decisions. In order to do this effectively, psychiatrists must understand the various “cultures” that operate both in tandem and in opposition, with the framework of due process driving legal decisions, and the safety and permanence framework guiding the decisions of child protective services. Since many trainees do not have the opportunity to work in clinical settings that allow immersion in these systems, I wanted to develop a curriculum aimed at enhancing knowledge of relevant agencies and services, understanding of the intersections between law, policy, and clinical practice, and comfort and skill in communicating with child welfare partners.

The first goal of my project, “Building Systems Bridges to Enhance the Effectiveness of Child and Adolescent Psychiatrists Working with Maltreated Children,” was to enhance my own knowledge of the various stakeholders in child welfare, and their respective frameworks for understanding the needs of maltreated children and their caregivers. Through the award, I was able to engage in several clinical, advocacy, and collaborative experiences to strengthen my cross-systems knowledge and comfort. Working at the Tulane Parenting Education Program (TPEP), where maltreated children and families involved with child protective services receive clinical services, allowed me to observe first-hand the challenges of bridging research and evidence-based interventions with the perspectives and needs of the child welfare system. The TPEP team works closely with child welfare workers, attorneys, CASA workers, and other community providers, allowing me to identify strategies for communicating effectively with these important collaborators. I also had the opportunity to participate in the Tulane Early Childhood Policy Leadership Institute (ECPLI), which brings together state and local leaders from diverse disciplines (child welfare, judiciary, health, business, government, education) who learn from experts in infant and early childhood mental health and trauma, and I was able to deliver a presentation to community providers at the Louisiana Child Well-Being Summit about evidence-based interventions and the importance of the caregiver-child relationship. These experiences gave me the opportunity to learn more about the perspectives of various stakeholders, to practice conveying my knowledge and expertise, and to identify how psychiatrists can be empowered to use their knowledge to inform and intervene in a comprehensive and far-reaching way.

In developing the curriculum, I sought guidance and input from both my primary mentor and from other experts in the field of child maltreatment and child welfare, including Madeleine Landrieu, Dean of Loyola University Law School and a former appeals court judge, Peter Digre, a veteran child welfare administrator in several different states, and Joan Kaufman, a distinguished investigator of traumatic stress and risk and resilience in maltreated children. A key outcome of this project was identifying the intercultural communication roadblocks that exist between stakeholders. In particular, the context of the attachment relationship – and the impact of caregiver disruptions on the developing child – is a key area in which psychiatrists can educate, advocate, and guide towards planful transitions, collaboration, and effective interventions. My discussions with these mentors made it increasingly clear that a curriculum in child

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maltreatment and child welfare must necessarily include education about advocacy from the organizational, community, and local/state legislature levels.

Building upon the objectives identified in the AACAP Systems-Based Practice: The Child Welfare System, and with an eye towards crafting a curriculum that can be easily adapted to training programs’ needs, we developed three introductory modules in child maltreatment, the child welfare system, and maltreatment prevention and intervention (including evidence based treatment and psychopharmacological treatment considerations), and three modules that provide additional depth in parent-child attachment, ethical issues and culturally competent care, and levels of advocacy. Throughout the modules is an emphasis on the role of the psychiatrist in bridging clinical knowledge with the perspectives and mandates of the systems serving maltreated children. By incorporating case examples, practical guidance, and video clips, the curriculum is designed not only to provide a theoretical framework, but to be pertinent, active, and engaging. As we pursue peer review of the curriculum, we hope it will serve an important role in strengthening psychiatrists’ competence, encouraging cross-systems collaboration, and promoting interest and leadership in the field of child maltreatment prevention and intervention.

References

Dr. Finelli is an assistant professor of psychiatry in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science at Tulane University School of Medicine. She received her bachelor’s degree in psychology at Johns Hopkins University, and her medical degree at Tulane University School of Medicine. She completed her residency in general psychiatry at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, where she served as chief resident for medical student education. She completed her fellowship in child and adolescent psychiatry, and an additional fellowship in infant and early childhood psychiatry, at Tulane. She currently supervises trainees in the Tulane Infant Mental Health Services (TIMHS) and serves as lead consulting psychiatrist in the Louisiana Mental Health Perinatal Partnership (LAMHPP). Her clinical interests include infant and early childhood mental health, maltreatment, dyadic interventions, and maternal mental health.

Charles H. Zeanah, Jr., MD, is the Mary Peters Sellars-Polchow Chair in Psychiatry, Professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics, and Vice Chair for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Tulane University School of Medicine. He serves as Executive Director of the Tulane Institute of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health. He also directs the Tulane Infant Team, a community-based intervention program for abused and neglected infants and toddlers in the New Orleans area. Dr. Zeanah is the recipient of honors including the Ruane Prize for Outstanding Achievement in Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Research from the Brain and Behavior Research Foundation, the Norbert and Charlotte Rieger Award for Outstanding Scientific Achievement from the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), the Agnes Purcell McGavin Award for Prevention from the American Psychiatric Association (APA), and the Blanche F. Ittelson Award for Research in Child Psychiatry from the APA. Dr. Zeanah is a Distinguished Life Fellow of AACAP and the APA and a Board Member of Zero to Three.