

VIEWPOINT

VOICES IN CARDIOLOGY

Looking Forward to Having My Voice Be Heard Live at the ACC Conference



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In 2016, my mentor, Professor Hasan Ali Farhan, the President of the Iraqi Scientific Council of Cardiology and a Fellow of the American College of Cardiology (ACC) encouraged me to become a member of the ACC. He saw this as an initial step toward my goal of becoming a specialized cardiology pharmacist, as the ACC is one of the first global organizations supporting the role of pharmacists as a crucial part of the heart team! Such membership also promised to help keep me updated with cardiac knowledge and elevate my standards in cardiology. I decided to send my ACC membership application on my birthday as a landmark date in my life. I was surprised by the kindness and the humanitarian manner of the ACC International Affairs Team, including Neal Kovach, Rose Marie McMahon, J.P. Baird, Alicia Rivas-Gutierrez, Mary Davis, and Damion Wise, all of whom supported me during my application . . . and shared with me in the celebration of my birthday when they discovered the importance of the date. They sent me a very impressive letter with their signatures and best wishes, and thus my journey with the ACC had a very precious beginning!

In 2017, after hearing the news of the Muslim travel ban in the United States, I read an interesting statement in *ACC News Digest* from the President of the ACC, Dr. Richard A. Chazal, entitled “ACC Statement on Executive Order Banning Travel By Foreign Nationals in Seven Countries” (1). I felt so happy that the ACC was supporting us overseas that I asked the ACC International Affairs Team to send my appreciation and best regards to Dr. Chazal. They connected me

with him by e-mail, and it was a great honor to communicate with such a humble and kind person. He increased my pride in being an ACC member and belonging to a historical organization such as the ACC, especially when he wrote to me, “Israa, please know that you have friends and colleagues in the ACC . . . and in the United States, who are rooting for your success. I hope to personally meet you at ACC.17 in Washington! Rick.”

In 2018, our first abstract (which was the first abstract of my life), about the role of registries for heart disease in pregnancy, was accepted to be presented during ACC.18 in Orlando, Florida. This was a great achievement for me and for my mentor, as it was the first abstract to be accepted for presentation in an ACC conference from scientists in Iraq! Moreover, it was my first abstract to be accepted in an international conference . . . my dream come true! I sent an e-mail to Dr. Chazal, who was so happy to learn my news, and we decided to meet at the conference; however, this dream ended with frustration because of a U.S. visa refusal—the new Muslim ban was the obstacle preventing me from presenting the abstract at ACC.18. That period of time was so difficult! I couldn’t stop crying, and whenever I remember this event, my eyes fill with tears—I could not join my colleagues at the ACC conference to present the first achievement in my cardiology journey because of the ban!

There were 2 things supporting me in this very hard situation. First, the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology (JACC)* published my abstract online, one of the targets in my first steps in the field of cardiology to enable my voice and ideas to reach the world. Second was the support of Dr. Chazal, who told me, “Israa, those of us in ACC are inspired by your diligence and scholarship in extraordinarily trying times. You are an excellent example to all of us and we wish to be like you! I’ve been in communication with our ACC staff to try and explore options

From the Baghdad Heart Center, Medical City, Baghdad, Iraq. The author attests they are in compliance with human studies committees and animal welfare regulations of the authors’ institutions and Food and Drug Administration guidelines, including patient consent where appropriate. For more information, visit the [Author Center](#).

that we might have to help you. While I don't have insight into the specific processes needed, I hope and pray that will be able to find a way to assist you in having the opportunity to present your work at ACC.18. Rick." His words were consolation for me from the disappointment caused by the visa refusal. In the same year, I was lucky with the European Society of Cardiology (ESC), when I received a 2018 ESC Congress Educational Grant to attend the meeting in Munich, Germany. I was the first pharmacist from Iraq to receive this grant. The first thing that I did was search the ESC Congress program to see if Dr. Chazal was among the participants, and I found that he was chairing one of the sessions. I attended the session eagerly and was listening to his comments with great pleasure. After the completion of the session, he was walking on the stage and reached the stairs; I said, "Hi, Dr. Richard, I'm Israa." He looked at me and was trying to think, "Who is Israa?" I said, "Israa, the pharmacist from Iraq." Then . . . what a wonderful expression appeared on his face! He was so happy to see me! We spoke and made plans to meet each other next time during the ACC.19 meeting.

In 2018, I was encouraged not to give up but instead continue to submit my abstracts every year to the ACC and to try again and again to get the visa for attending the ACC Scientific Sessions to be among the best cardiologists and cardiovascular scientists, sharing ideas. I realized that the opportunity to learn was of paramount importance and that, even if I couldn't get my visa and my voice couldn't be heard live during the conference, my ideas and work would be spread globally by publishing my abstracts in *JACC* . . . as our voice overseas. My dreams came true for the second and third time in 2019 and 2020, when my abstracts were accepted to be presented at ACC.19 and ACC.20. My work was on the role of female pharmacists in the care of women with congenital heart defects and the role of cardiology pharmacists in primary prevention in the cardiac care unit. Unfortunately, I received a visa refusal both times. Dr. Chazal and I were able to meet again during the CardioEgypt Congress 2020, as 2 of my clinical cases were accepted to be presented at that important meeting.

Visa refusal has been a continuing challenge for me, but this challenge cannot and should not force me to abandon my goals, so I decided to submit my

abstracts for ACC.21. During the preparation of my abstracts for ACC.21, I heard the statement of the newly elected President Joe Biden saying, "I will end the Muslim ban on day 1 . . . day 1." Hearing his voice saying these words with great confidence and seeing his body language provided me with a strong belief that I will finally see fulfillment of my goals, and I will be able very soon to attend the ACC sessions in person to make my voice heard live during the conference among the supporting ACC members. Encouraging words have me thinking optimistically that maybe next year I can attend ACC.21 if coronavirus disease-2019 is under control. I hope that international, national, and medical leaders can help to ensure that all are supportive of not only Muslims but of cardiology experts from around the world because of our humanitarian mission to reduce the burden of heart disease globally. Borders must not separate our efforts to learn from each other and to make positive changes in the field of cardiology.

I recall the story of the scientist who discovered warfarin, which was used to save the life of the 34th U.S. President, Dwight D. Eisenhower, in 1955 after a heart attack. I believe that this time, U.S. President Biden will help save the rights of Muslim (and all!) cardiovascular scientists to gather and share their experiences at ACC conferences. I believe that my voice will reach leaders through *JACC*, which can represent our voices when we cannot directly speak. I believe that one day in the near future, I will be able to stand in front of Heart House to take photos and to get a pin holding the beautiful symbol of the ACC. I believe that the ACC will continue to support its members wherever they are, whatever their religion or race, and whenever they need it because ACC is not just an organization—ACC is the beating heart for cardiology experts all over the world . . . and their unheard voices.

COMMENTARY

Israa's account is a compelling story of scholarship, patience, and persistence in pursuit of using her voice toward improved patient care. She too kindly characterizes my words and actions, but all of our names could/should be substituted for mine, because it is

our collective privilege and obligation to show respect to our colleagues and to provide mentorship when afforded the chance to do so. It is our great opportunity to appreciate the times when the mentee becomes the mentor . . . as all of us should learn from the wisdom and grace of Israa Yaseen.

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1. Chazal RA. ACC statement on executive order banning travel by foreign nationals in seven countries. Available at: <https://www.acc.org/latest-in-cardiology/articles/2017/01/30/16/15/acc-statement-on-executive-order-banning-travel-by-foreign-nationals-in-seven-countries>. Accessed January 2021.

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