

Dr. Lauren Murphy on understanding how decisions and the environment influence sci quality of life  
Life at Kessler Foundation - Ep 3

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JOAN BANKS-SMITH: 00:09 This is Joan Banks-Smith, host for Kessler Foundation's newest podcast series, Life at Kessler Foundation. I had the opportunity to speak with employees from all of our centers who have diverse roles and passions that helped change the lives of people with disabilities. Our research assistants and coordinators, engineers, scientists, technicians, fellows, physical therapists and support staff all play a vital role in our research at the foundation. Today, I'm with Lauren Murphy, a postdoctoral fellow who is supported from the Craig H. Neilson Foundation. She works in the Center for Spinal Cord Injury Research and the Center for Outcomes and Assessment Research. Welcome to the show, Lauren.

LAUREN MURPHY: 00:51 Thank you. Thank you for having me.

BANKS-SMITH: 00:53 You worked at Kessler Foundation prior to your receiving your PhD. What was your position then?

MURPHY: 01:00 I started working at the Foundation in 2018 as senior research assistant in the Centers for Spinal Cord Injury and Outcomes and Assessment Research. And I started working here during my final year of my doctoral program while I was completing my PhD in sociology. Most of the training that I got through my doctoral program was to prepare us to become professors, to work in academic jobs. And I knew that I didn't want to do that. I was more interested in working at an organization like Kessler. I was particularly interested in a nonprofit organization. So I took a job here at Kessler to gain more work experience in this type of environment while finishing my degree.

BANKS-SMITH: 01:42 I noticed that your degree is in sociology. How does that translate into spinal cord injury research?

MURPHY: 01:48 My focus in sociology was what's called medical sociology. So the focus is in the social determinants of health, meaning how a person's social characteristics and groups they belong to, the type of community they live in, the attitudes, norms and behaviors and the messages they get about health and well-being. How all of those things shape their well-being over the course of their lifetime. For people with spinal cord injury who are living in the community, the characteristics of the communities that they live in can be really important for determining long-term outcomes, meaning their ability to live independently, to participate in their community the way that they want to. I think my background in sociology has given me a strong foundation for understanding how not only a person's individual decisions and freewill, but really how that interacts with the environment in which they're in to influence their quality of life. That's the approach to understanding health and well-being that medical sociology takes. And I think that becomes particularly salient when

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you're working with populations like people living with spinal cord injury who sometimes experience a lot of barriers in their environment that can influence their quality of life.

BANKS-SMITH: 03:04

Now, that being said, can you share with us any of the studies that you're currently involved in?

MURPHY: 03:09

My primary fellowship project looks at preventive health care utilization for people with spinal cord injury. And we're particularly interested in two aspects of that focus area for which there's not a lot of information. One is how if there's ingroup variation in health care utilization for people with spinal cord injury. Because when we say people spinal cord injury, that is, of course, a very diverse population. And what we do know is that there are social disparities in long-term outcomes and secondary complications among people with spinal cord injury. So in other words, some groups are more vulnerable than others, meaning socioeconomic status, racial ethnic groups. So less is known about how much variation there is within the spinal cord injury population for those outcomes. We also are particularly interested in learning more about dental and vision care receipt among people with spinal cord injury. As I know from working with Dr. Amanda Botticello on her program of outcomes research that really looks at how the community environment influences quality of life after spinal cord injury. We would think doctors' offices are-- if any sort of community destination is going to be accessible, doctors' offices would be. But that's not always the case. Both dental and vision checkups require transferring into a special chair, especially in New Jersey. A lot of buildings are older. Exam rooms are small. And so, we hypothesized that those probably constitute barriers to being able to get dental and vision care for people with spinal cord injury. But there's just not a lot of information on that topic. So that's the primary focus of my research for my fellowship. I also work with Dr. Amanda Botticello. She's my primary mentor for my fellowship on her program of outcomes research which looks at the influence of the environment and the characteristics of the communities where people live and how that influences their quality of life after spinal cord injury.

BANKS-SMITH: 05:09

We're going to transition to a little more of the culture here at Kessler Foundation. What is your favorite part about working at the foundation?

MURPHY: 05:16

My favorite part about working at the foundation is definitely the people. I've been very lucky to have great mentors and part of that is because I'm part of our postdoctoral fellowship program. So mentorship is a very important part of helping us transition to the next stage of our career and becoming independent researchers. I was also lucky to have a great mentor when I was working as a research assistant who helped me transition into our postdoctoral fellowship program so I could start my career here. I think it's just it's not something that you can find. It's not easily replaceable. So I really love the people I work with. And I love that as an organization, we're large enough to have a lot of resources that I think are very important for early career researchers, which I am. As a fellow, we have our sponsored research administration, Matt Weiner, who really helps us with every aspect of applying for

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new research grants. We have our on-demand support from our IT team. We're large in that we have these great resources, but we're also small enough as an organization to know everyone by name. And that's really nice because I think it just creates like a much more collegial environment. So I've really enjoyed that aspect of having a research career at this type of organization.

BANKS-SMITH: 06:32

I know a number of research assistants, senior research assistants have come in. It helps springboard their education with moving on to get a PhD. We have folks that work all over the globe. So it's wonderful to see the growth within the organization for sure.

MURPHY: 06:49

One of the things that I've enjoyed most here is just seeing how both at the research assistant level but also at the post-doctoral level, the emphasis on training. Our scientific staff really values and does very well.

BANKS-SMITH: 07:03

Whether you're a researcher or your support staff, there's always opportunity to learn, to educate. I think that's one of the things I've always liked about the foundation because it gives you the chance to grow.

MURPHY: 07:16

Absolutely.

BANKS-SMITH: 07:16

Thank you so much. [music] And we wish you the very best with your continuing work here at the foundation and wherever your journey leads you.

MURPHY: 07:24

Yeah, thank you. I very much appreciate the opportunity to do this with you.

BANKS-SMITH: 07:30

To learn more about Lauren, the Center for Spinal Cord Injury Research, the Center for Outcomes and Assessment Research, or if you're interested in a career at Kessler Foundation, be sure and check out the links in the program notes. This podcast was recorded on Monday, July 19th, 2021 remotely, and was edited and produced by Joan Banks-Smith, creative producer for Kessler Foundation.

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