

A portrait of Aude Molinard-Chenu

By Yann Bernardinelli – December 2016

From mice to patients and back and forth

Aude Molinard-Chenu is fascinated by both the fundamental and clinical aspects of schizophrenia and has received funding that will allow her to combine psychiatric research and clinics. This young recipient of a Ph.D in neuroscience talks to us about her career choices, this opportunity to do both research and clinics at the same time, as well as the challenges of wearing two hats.

Before starting University, Aude Molinard-Chenu wanted to study biology and dreamed of doing fundamental science and research. After looking into available course options and receiving plenty of advice she soon realized that it would be better to study medicine if she wanted to become a researcher. That is to say, career prospects and employment conditions in an academic science career don't have the same security as in a medical career. So it's not a matter of charity, despite her voluntary work in Mali, but rather a thirst for fundamental knowledge that pushed Aude to join the benches of the faculty of medicine at the University of Geneva (UNIGE).

A schizophrenia mission

Almost immediately, Aude leaps at the opportunities she's offered, notably the research for medical students program (recherche pour étudiant en médecine PREM) at Geneva University (UNIGE) that offers aspiring clinician-scientists internships and training courses. Aude chose to train with Prof Jozseph Kiss at the Department of Basic Neurosciences at the University of Geneva and then left for three months to Singapore where she studied the role of axonal transport in Schizophrenia. A real eye-opener for Aude, that leads her to choose a PhD in neuroscience and to a deep-rooted interest in psychiatry. "I had a lot of questions in my head about the fundamental bases of neuroscience and how their dysregulation could lead to mental disorders. In particular for schizophrenia, that in extreme cases can lead to unusual and troubling behavior".

After six years of medical studies, Aude Chenu followed on to a PhD in neuroscience, carried out in the lab of Alexandre Dayer where she studied schizophrenia susceptibility genes and their putative roles in mouse brain development. The valuable 22q11 model, so dear to the first project of neurodevelopmental mechanisms involved in the pathogenesis of schizophrenia of the NCCR-Synapsy.

A Swiss Medical Association (FMH)-research possibility

The PhD was successfully finished in October 2016-that is a PhD from the Lemanic Neuroscience Doctoral School and not the usual medical school MD-PhD which "was not rich enough in neuroscience". For Aude Molinard-Chenu the choice was then doing post-doctoral research *or* becoming a Swiss Medical Association certified psychiatrist. Even though maintaining research activity is feasible while training as a Swiss Medical Association certified psychiatrist, she confides that the problem with this arrangement is that doing research in clinics means doing it in your free time, as clinicians are rarely supportive and money is lacking. So is this an impossible choice, fundamental science or psychiatry, for

someone who loves both? Not for Aude Molinard-Chenu, as the Faculty of Medicine in Geneva awarded her an internal science fellowship that provides a part-time salary for two years to do fundamental research. Thanks to this 'helping-hand' for promoting clinician–scientist training she could start her training for a Swiss Medical Association certificate in adult psychiatry and psychotherapy in the JADE (jeunes adultes avec troubles psychiques debutants, young adults with emerging psychiatric disorders) Program at the Geneva University Hospitals (HUG) with Dr Logos Curtis. She deals with emerging psychiatric disorders in 18-25 year-olds, such as bipolar disorders, personality disorders and most importantly, schizophrenia.

Why psychiatry rather than neurology? Aude Molinard-Chenu explains that in her opinion “clinical neurology focuses on a symptomatic approach which makes it less interesting from a therapeutic point of view”. She reveals that young doctors are choosing neurology rather than psychiatry, not too bad as it leaves space for those who left for a PhD and want to return to clinics, as places can be rare, depending on the specialty.

The difficult return to clinics

Being confronted by patients after four years in basic research is probably not going to be easy. Aude Molinard-Chenu acknowledges the difficulties of a return to the clinics, admitting however that she is fortunate to be joining a department where young doctors are well supported. To help herself in this situation, she says she uses the skills learned during her PhD: resourcefulness, autonomy and most of all agility. The main difficulty really is integration. “Beliefs and different tendencies in psychiatry generate power struggles and prejudices” she states. Many psychiatrists still consider that neuroscience has nothing to do with psychiatry. So accepting a neuroscientist is no pushover. “Sometimes it’s difficult to make my position clear because I don’t necessarily identify with the literary and philosophical side” she confides. Aude keeps open-minded though, trying to make best use of the different viewpoints, drawing inspiration and progressing.

Harmony in the clinic

Access to key positions in research is very unusual for women but that does not worry Aude. Although she admits to being the brunt of sexist remarks during her training, she feels sufficiently reassured by her supervisors in the Department of Psychiatry and the Faculty of medicine concerning her career choices. In addition she feels the clinical environment is compatible with a harmonious development of her research as well as her private life, due to the possibility of working part-time in the outpatient setting. “It is the spirit of openness about research and clinics that reigns in the Department of Psychiatry that influenced my career choices. In terms of quality of life, I must admit that the clinic wins over the postdoctoral work”.

In the future Aude Molinard-Chenu would like to become a physician and keep working part-time in research. Synapsy warmly encourages Aude in her career and wishes her every success.