

What Matters: AANS 2024 Chicago Meeting Bello Shehu, CAANS President



AANS 2024 has come and gone, yet for some of us the theme and experiences of this meeting continue to echo in our minds. The titanic meeting venue, one of the greatest in the world with all its grandeur, could not equal the theme of the meeting, which is simply “What Matters”. The theme was surely meant to intrigue, and at times bewilder but surely to inspire the participant particularly before arriving for the meeting (as in my case).

The activities commenced on Thursday morning with the Advisory Council meeting, where while registering I was requested to hand-pick one label among many, on “what matters” to me - I selected “RESPECT” and it was added to my docket.

The Advisory Council meeting was an opportunity to see some administrative workings of the AANS and was new for me, coming from a very young continental body the Continental Association of African Neurosurgical Societies (CAANS). It was a magnanimous learning experience, the ambiance was cordial, semi-formal, and full of information and reports from various committee chairpersons, including the future direction of the AANS and the upcoming innovation on the AANS logo.



Dr Annette Gordon-Reed

The conferences proper began on Friday with Practical Clinic courses covering numerous special areas of Neurosurgery.

The opening session “Shaping the Future of Neurosurgery” in the evening brought distinguished speakers, each taking us into his/her area of interest and giving us their “what matters”. Harvard Law Professor Annette Gordon-Reed took us back to the beginning of the American Declaration of Independence with its noble ideal statement of “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal” and the contradictory practice of slavery at the time, even by Thomas Jefferson himself, and whether or not the modern day call for removal of some historical figures in public spaces is justified.

She reasons that having some idea on how that knot was tied will make it easier to untie and that this matters, and connecting and learning from the past and moving forward is important. She reminded us of the need to know which signature problem our era required us to address as each era has their signature problem, to understand and deal with, using what ever tools we have. Nothing is foreordained or written; we have to make it.

She wondered if, as citizens, we can put away our personal preferences and listen to opposing opinions from our compatriots.

The Charles L Plante lecturer, Thomas Nasca, perused into medical profession and our professionalism, wondering what Charlie Plante might ask us today, about our level of satisfaction with the trustworthiness in our current system of care vis-a-vis patient trust - and if not, what will each of us be willing to contribute to change the current circumstance?

Hunt-Wilson Lecturer, Astrophysicist Brian Green took us out of the planet earth and went back to before the beginning of time, as if to tell us that “Nothing Really Matters”. Out of the estimated 4.5 billion years of the history of earth, we humans arrived in the last 2 minutes of a 24-hour clock!

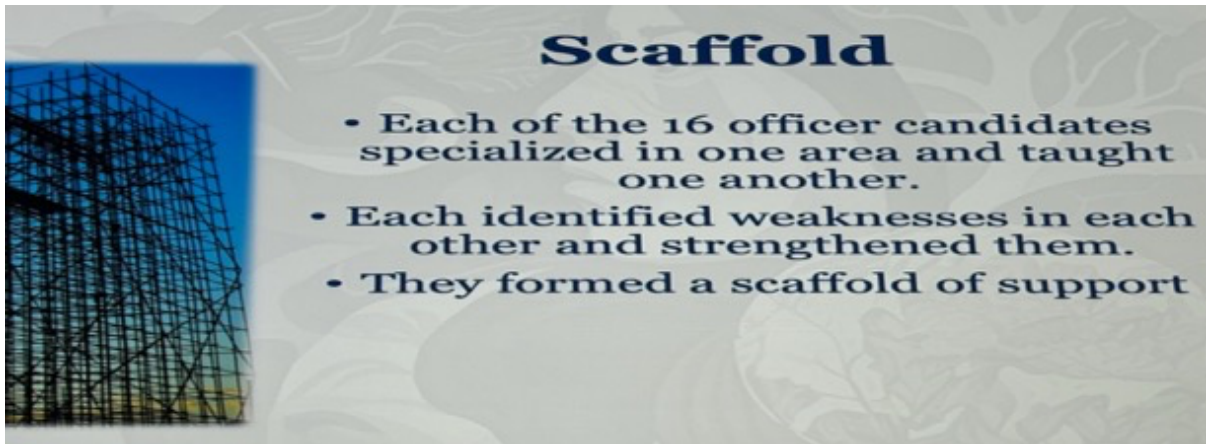
I was saying to myself that, we really don’t matter when he surged it further to the end on how all this will really end into a black hole!

So, what matters? I said to myself, as if he heard me, he replied, “What matters is Entropy and Evolution have been successful in getting the human consciousness studied and understood, be it incompletely, the existence and purpose if any: this Matters! And it’s a win at the end.

The multiple plenary sessions continue to challenge and inspire as we moved to the second day of the meeting,

The Hervey Cushing medalist, “Orthopedics-Neurosurgeon” Dr Christopher Shaffrey, wasted no time on explaining what matters in spine surgery and why it should be included into mainstream Neurosurgery. In the same session David Brooks delivered the Theodore Kurze Lecture beginning with an apology for mispronouncing Neurosurgeons as “Narcissist” the last time he addressed the meeting! He detailed how to have better conversation with each other by being good listeners and resisting the temptation to interrupt, no matter how well-meaning! He advocated on listening even in the long pause (CBT immediately comes to mind). Ask questions, he said, if needed, but do not interrupt. This surely matters to us as physicians I thought.

The session goes on to the AANS President Dr Anthony Asher on the power of Humility. He went as far back as Abraham Lincoln’s 2nd inaugural address to make the point of how humility and courage united the divided nation “with malice towards none and charity to all”. Dr Asher went on to the need for us to look after each other, to complement the weak points of others with our strengths, to synergize and receive the same back. The story of the Afro-American Marines in the 2nd World War was a proof of our way to success - we must scaffold to succeed.



Dr Anthony Asher's slide

He evangelizes on humility until all or almost all were swayed; I surely was with him - to paraphrase Maya Angelou, ***“You have put a rainbow in the World of Neurosurgical Cloud”***
“Thank you, Tony.”

Sunday was full of so many parallel sessions including the Rhoton Family Lecture and topics on What Matters in Cerebrovascular, Pediatrics, Neuro-oncology, etc. There were enough topical sessions that one is spoiled for choice. I attended the Tumor Session where one of the speakers included a patient living with low grade glioma.



Low Grade Glioma session

It was heartening to hear to her story during awake craniotomy, to recovery and having the surgery after recurrence again. She recounted her experience as the surgeon was asking her

feedback on areas of her body during the surgery and when he stimulated the area of her dimple, ostensibly, the dimple is so important to her as a heritage from her father, who sadly also died from a brain tumor: this Matters. She educates and encourages, continues research in this area, since the patients' society is always on the lookout online for the latest available tumor therapy.

Sunday also witnessed the incoming President address on "Out with the Vertical, IN with the Horizontal" a reorganization on the administrative structure of the AANS and an irresistible invitation to Boston 2025. Jacques Morcos assured everyone of a once in a lifetime experience in Boston, to deliberate the "Power of One, Impact of Many" - a Global celebration he said. Good luck, Jacques Morcos - and see you in Boston!



With Edward R Laws, Jr and his spouse - one of my happiest moments

Monday was the Global Neurosurgery meeting with Isabelle Germano as the moderator, on what matters to each continent and the promise to continue this discussion in Boston.

It was time to depart for the shoreline of Lake Michigan, a stone's throw from the convention center, to reflect on these four days of friendship, learning, and networking with the theme of "What Matters" in my mind, now with a question mark at its end - What Matters?

Paraphrasing the poet Walt Whitman, struck me,

"The question "What Matters?" so sad! Recurring.

What good amid these, o me, o life?

Answer- That you are here - that life exists and identity,

that the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse."

I hope and wish so! I said to myself.

AANS Chicago 2024 has been a worthwhile experience - I am looking forward to AANS Boston 2025.