

## INSPIRING ADOLESCENTS TOWARDS BETTER HEALTH PRACTICES

### Dr. Smita Shah, OAM

#### *Service to community health*

"You must be so happy," I put to Dr. Smita Shah, OAM. "I am so thrilled, because I've had a great day," Dr. Shah replied with her usual unstoppable enthusiasm. "Have just come off a fantastic session with Year 7 students and their parents and teachers, for a project we're working on currently. It's on young kids and the use of e-cigarettes and vaping. Such wonderful insights!"

"Um, I meant your Queen's Birthday honour," I said, when I managed to get a word in.

"Oh, ha ha," she laughed her unbridled laugh. "I'm thrilled about that too, yes! I'm deeply honoured that my work with marginalised and disadvantaged communities is recognised."

Dr Shah is Director of Prevention Education and Research Unit at the Western Sydney Local Health District, and Clinical Professor at the Sydney Medical School's Faculty of Medicine and Health.

Having trained as a doctor in Scotland, Smita arrived in Australia in the early 1980s to work at Sydney Children's Hospital.

"I observed then that many of the problems my young patients presented, could have been prevented," she recounted. "The same observation stood out with the work I was doing with young children in rural India at the time, through the organisation SEVA."

Setting her sights on prevention education, she decided to take a Masters' degree in Community Health from Sydney

Uni. It was a decision that took her career from strength to strength.

"My best work, I'd say, is the work I've done with the youth, motivating them to make a difference in their own health and well-being," Smita revealed. "Health habits are initiated in adolescence; to nudge them to adopt good practices now will see them grow into healthy adults as well as health-conscious future parents."

One of the projects she initiated, SALSA (Students As LifeStyle Activists), has seen much success. The award-winning project involves a unique peer educational program which motivates high school students to lead a healthier lifestyle by improving diet and increasing physical activity. University students are trained to be SALSA educators: they in turn coach high school students to be Peer Leaders for younger students.

What set the program apart was that it involved an entire community of stakeholders: the University of Sydney, Western Sydney Primary Health Network, Western Sydney Local Health District, and medical practitioners and high schools in Western Sydney. Some 50,000 students, it has been claimed, have benefitted from this program.

Dr Shah seems to be drawn to young people.

"I do like working with young people, yes. They are upfront and honest. They give me hope."

She realises it is imperative to equip them with the skills they will need as they grow into adults. "Given contemporary challenges such as climate change and the current health crisis, we need to encourage knowledge-gathering and application, as well as foster skills in advocacy and leadership."

She added, "I've seen powerful transformations in young people's attitudes in my own work at Western Sydney, but I must say the same shift I have been able



to effect in rural India, moves me to tears – the impact is so much more powerful there."

Dr Shah knew she wanted to be a doctor since she was a young child. "Growing up in Tanzania, I saw first-hand the work my doctor Dad did in the Masai community, and the difference he made in people's lives."

Yet working in prevention has had its challenges. "You can't see what you're preventing," she laughed. "But the satisfaction is in the fact that you are working at the grassroots level; assessing what the community needs and

implementing programs to facilitate that. You're right in the thick of things – not in an ivory tower somewhere far! I feel privileged to have worked in Western Sydney for over 30 years."

Being a woman of colour too has had its trials. "If you are small like me, and with a tendency to speak up, you are likely to be dismissed or branded a difficult woman!"

Dr Smita Shah's response to that is one worth emulating: "Educate yourself; pick up as many degrees as you can; be persistent. Show your worth through action, because action speaks louder than words."

**Rajni Anand Luthra**



this patient group," Dr Rao said.

He also added that there are a significant number of people with complex trauma backgrounds and personality disorders who unfortunately go undiagnosed and therefore untreated. Some of them end up in drug and alcohol settings and in prison populations, while others can face family violence and child protection difficulties.

Dr Rao is committed to making sure high-quality care and treatment is made accessible to all with the diagnosis of a personality disorder or complex trauma disorder. Prioritising access to mental health services, he also volunteers for a charity called the Australian Borderline Personality Disorder Foundation, of which he has been Founding

Member and Deputy Chair since 2012.

Dr Rao's expertise has also seen him invited to be a lecturer at Monash University (where he is Honorary Adjunct Clinical Associate Professor) and at Melbourne University.

There has been increased attention to mental health during the COVID pandemic, but Dr Rao feels that in general there is still a long way to go to create an ideal system to provide the best compassionate care for sufferers.

Perhaps this is why Dr. Rao shows no signs of slowing down.

"There's still a lot to learn, and a lot more to contribute," he remarked.

**Iqra Saeed**