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Dr. Ally Prebtani and Dr. Zahira Khalid: Building healthcare capacity in the developing world

As McMaster faculty, both Dr. Ally Prebtani and Dr. Zahira Khalid focus their work here in Hamilton – but the scope of their care extends far beyond Canada’s borders.

Both Dr. Prebtani and Dr. Khalid volunteer their time to train and collaborate with healthcare providers in developing countries – Dr. Prebtani as the founder and director of the Internal Medicine Residency International Health Program, which focuses on Uganda, and Dr. Khalid as program director of the first internal medicine residency program at Georgetown Public Hospital in Guyana.

Dr. Prebtani, who was born in Uganda and immigrated to Canada as a young child, says his interest in global health stems from a tradition of volunteerism that was instilled in him from an early age.

“In my community, there’s a very strong sense of volunteerism – a lot of the things we do is based on voluntary service without expecting anything monetary in return,” he said. “We try to instill it in our children, and it was also encouraged and nurtured by my parents.”

Dr. Prebtani’s work as founding director of the Internal Medicine Residency International Health Program focuses on building capacity in Uganda, where there can be a lack of infrastructure, physical resources, and human resources.

Dr. Prebtani points out that one of the biggest challenges for developing countries like Uganda is that there is a lack of

advanced formal training programs. As a result, a key pillar of the program has been to take McMaster residents and faculty to Uganda to teach, research, and collaborate.

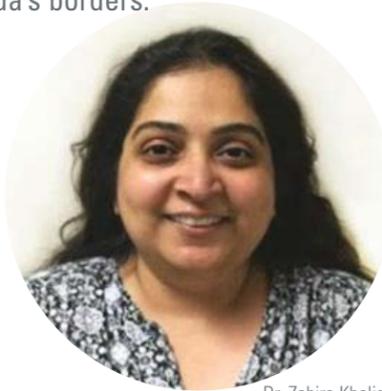
In turn, residents from Uganda are also invited to learn, train, and socialize here in Hamilton – a process that strengthens both the professional and social bonds between the two countries.

“A lot of the Ugandan leadership and the residents have said, “We’re not your colleagues anymore - we’re your friends,”” said Dr. Prebtani.

The primary goal of the program is to empower and train local health care providers in order to foster self-sustaining growth in the Ugandan health care system.

“It’s not a one-off, or medical tourism. We really want to build capacity and make this program sustainable – which has shown itself to be the case,” said Dr. Prebtani. “It’s been almost two decades that we’ve been doing this, and you see lots of quality improvement and lots of feedback from our counterparts in Uganda.”

The drive for sustainability and longevity has also inspired Dr. Khalid’s work in Guyana. Dr. Khalid has spent ten years working in the field of global health and has volunteered as a physician



Dr. Zahira Khalid

and clinical educator in Uganda, Peru, Cambodia and Namibia.

But during her first visit to Guyana, she felt drawn to the idea of creating a lasting program that would have major impacts on the level and quality of care.

“Once I went there, I just knew there was a lot that could be done, and a lot that could be sustainable, which was quite in contrast to where I had worked in previous places,” she said. “Things just didn’t seem to be sustainable. You went there, you’d work on something, and then it would be back to stage one. You could never leave something behind.”

“Here, I saw an opportunity to do something, keep it sustainable, and hand it back to the people who could run it locally.”

She took over leadership of the program in 2015 after the previous director unexpectedly had to return to the U.S. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic,

Dr. Prebtani at foot of bed left.
Group photo taken pre-COVID

Dr. Khalid traveling to Guyana for two week intervals every six weeks to deliver curriculum, oversee exams, help with recruitment, coach, and mentor the residents – duties which continued virtually once pandemic travel limitations were put in place.

In her role as program director, Dr. Khalid has overseen the education of the first-ever locally trained Guyanese physicians and the establishment of a new department of medicine. Prior to the creation of this program, Dr. Khalid points out that there were three or four internists in the entire country – all of whom were trained outside of Guyana and worked in the private sector and didn’t provide any teaching or mentorship.

Now, there have been 16 Guyanese graduates of the internal medicine residency program, all of whom are now working in the public sector, and 20 residents currently enrolled in the program. This has a huge impact on the availability and accessibility of care for the Guyanese population.

“Before, they would have to go outside the country to get specialized care,” said Dr. Khalid. “One of the residents said that it kind of changed the history of how internal medicine is provided.”

Dr. Khalid has just finished her role as program director, and has now handed over the leadership of the program to a former graduate. She continues to act as a mentor and assistant program director and helps to oversee programming – including helping to manage the response to Covid-19.

“I’m very proud of how they have come together to provide care for the patients – the person who provided most of the Covid testing and Covid care is recent graduate,” she said. “I think they’ve done an amazing job controlling the pandemic and educating the public.” ■

