



May 2010 Scientist of the Month

**Dr. Nazeem Muhajarine- Professor and Chair, Community Health and Epidemiology
University of Saskatchewan**



Dr. Nazeem Muhajarine is a public health researcher and a professor at the College of Medicine at the University of Saskatchewan. He was born and raised in Sri Lanka, where his father was a public health inspector. Public health was a common subject around the dinner table at the Muhajarine house. Dr. Muhajarine later studied psycho-biology and went on to enroll in the School of Public Health in Massachusetts.

Dr. Muhajarine went back to Sri Lanka for a month in 1986 to study the effectiveness of a UNICEF-funded slum and squatters development program in Colombo, the country's capital. His job was to collect data and stories from people living in the slums. It was this trip to his home country that shifted his focus from medicine to public health research.

Dr. Muhajarine is passionate about making a difference in society through his research and through mentoring his colleagues and students. His research concerns the environment that young children live in. His recent project, *Understanding the Early Years*, is a study of the role that families and communities play in the lives of children. Full-day kindergarten classes have been launched in 13 schools in Saskatchewan from this project. Saskatoon school boards have initiated major literacy programs and the city's public library has improved access to services in underprivileged areas as a result of Dr. Muhajarine's research.

Currently, his team is working with the Provincial Ministry of Education to assess several other full-time kindergarten programs, and to find out whether the Saskatchewan government's early childhood intervention program, *KidsFirst*, is helping high-risk children and their families.

Dr. Muhajarine has received the Knowledge Translation Award from the Canadian Institute of Health Research in recognition of his research and its successful application in the community, which helps to build healthier communities for Saskatchewan children.

What, or who, inspired your decision to become a scientist or to work in your area?

When I was growing up in Sri Lanka I watched my father, who was a public health inspector, interact with people in the community and go to work sometimes dressed in a smart public health inspector's uniform. The way he interacted with people--his genuine concern about people's health, people's admiration of him and his work, the helpful role I saw him play in people's lives--had made an early impression on me.

Originally, I wanted to be a doctor. My visit to Sri Lanka in 1986 changed my mind about the career path I wanted to follow. On returning to my College I started taking sociology, economic, and anthropology courses, instead of organic chemistry and advanced biology courses. I was well on my way to making a difference in people's lives as my dad had done decades before.

What is the most interesting thing you have ever learned or discovered?

The most interesting thing I've learned is that children are amongst the most resilient people that there are in our society. We have done studies looking at various factors--from family, neighbourhoods, schools, and larger society--that impact children, beginning with even before they are born to when they begin school. Some children grow up in some of the most unhelpful circumstances yet rise above these circumstances to do as well as any other children who have not had to experience negative circumstances. We need to keep this in mind even when we pursue an understanding as to why some children are born with setbacks already built into their bodies and why they fail to thrive as most kids do.

What accomplishments are you most proud of?

The accomplishments that I am most proud of are really not my own directly. They are, instead, the accomplishments of my students and staff whom I have had the good fortune to interact with, and hopefully I have played a role in helping them to achieve their successes. As a mentor, I take great satisfaction from the accomplishments of my students and staff.

Were there any obstacles in your education or career, and how did you overcome them?

There were many. I grew up in a country where the competition to get into the "right" school, and then into a university was extremely stiff. The fact that I was a minority (in terms of religion, language, ethnicity, and even in terms of physical characteristics) and almost everyone knew I was a minority didn't help things much. No one in my family--except for an aunt, who was a role model--had gone to university and people of "our kind" were not known to be amongst the intellectual elites in society. Being in North America, where I am a visible but atypical minority presented an interesting twist to my self-awareness. The support of my family, a few of my colleagues and an attitude that most

people mean well even if it isn't readily apparent have helped me to work through these impediments.

What is a typical (work) day like?

There are no two days alike so it is difficult to conclusively present what a routine day is like. A few things however are fairly predictable: I attend many meetings, not only with colleagues in the University but also with partners outside the university. The meetings I look forward to most are those that relate to research projects particularly when we discuss projects at the beginning stages. My meetings with students are also a highlight in my day. I try to find time during the day to do some hands-on research--whether it is reviewing research results, writing, or presenting. I do some teaching and my interactions with graduate or medical students bring home the core reason why I had chosen to stay in an academic environment. We are privileged to work with students and help influence the next generation of scientists and world-citizens.

What advice do you have for future scientists?

My advice to future scientists is three-fold. First, be curious about the world and its people. A prepared mind is a lucky mind. Be open to different possibilities and prepared to be surprised. Second, don't give up on yourself, no matter what. Third, have fun doing what you do, and when it ceases to be fun, then it is time for change.

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