

2015 Young Investigator: Dr. Sindhu Johnson

1. You had mentioned in an interview with The Arthritis Society (TAS) that it was your dream to become an arthritis medical specialist. What or who influenced you along the way to develop this dream?

I have been lucky to have many individuals who have influenced my journey. Dr. Majed Khraishi was my neighbor in St. John's, Newfoundland, and he was the one to put the idea in my head.

During my training, I was inspired by some of the legends in academic rheumatology—

Dr. Dafna Gladman, Dr. Murray Urowitz, Dr. Peter Lee, Dr. Arthur Bookman, Dr. Simon Carette, Dr. Rob Inman, Dr. Lori Albert, Dr. Cathy Dewar, Dr. Ed Keystone, Dr. Joan Wither, Dr. Adel Fam, Dr. Rachel Shupak, Dr. Louise Perlin, Dr. Laurence Rubin, and Dr. Heather MacDonald-Blumer. All of these individuals are so passionate about what they do; they are all very talented and love their job. I knew I wanted to be the same and work in this kind of environment. Dr. Gillian Hawker and Dr. Brian Feldman were my MSc and PhD supervisors, respectively. They are both brilliant people and set me on the research path of a clinical epidemiologist. Dr. Feldman taught me to view my research training as the process of collecting tools for a tool kit. When faced with a question from the clinic, there are a number of tools that can be used to find the answer. Together with Dr. Janet Pope and Dr. Claire Bombardier, these individuals currently mentor me as I transition to international collaborations. I am really glad to have my “epi” buddies in the Canadian rheumatology community, Dr. Shahin Jamal, Dr. Antonio Avina, and Dr. Marie



Hudson. It is great to be able to talk about what we do, share ideas, and have fun when we see each other.

2. Why did you decide to focus your investigation on scleroderma? What other diseases have you focused on?

One of the reasons I love rheumatology is the opportunity to address multisystem disease, and scleroderma is the prototype. When I finished my clinical training, bosentan had just come to the market, with the potential to improve survival. I believe success begets success, so I

could see that a number of exciting new therapies would become available during the course of my career. Scleroderma is now where rheumatoid arthritis (RA) was 15 years ago. It is an exciting time to be involved with scleroderma!

Since my doctoral work studied pulmonary hypertension in scleroderma, I am affiliated with the University Health Network (UHN) Pulmonary Hypertension Programme. As a result, my research has also focused on pulmonary hypertension in the rheumatic diseases, including scleroderma, systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), RA, and mixed connective tissue disease (MCTD).

3. What was your first thought when you learned that you would receive this award?

Yippee! I was and continue to be thankful for this recognition.

I gave Christine Charnock a big hug. She has watched me “grow up” in rheumatology, and it was really nice to share that moment with her.

4. What has been your proudest accomplishment in your research to date?

My doctoral work was nominated by the Institute of Health Policy, Management and Evaluation (IHPE) at the University of Toronto for two separate awards. The Governor General's Gold Medal is awarded to the graduate student who has achieved the most outstanding academic record in the graduating class for the Doctoral degree. The Council of Graduate Schools/PROQUEST Distinguished Dissertation Award recognizes completed dissertations representing original work that makes an unusually significant contribution to the discipline. Although I did not receive either, I am proud that my work was considered.

5. You are marooned on a desert island. What is the one book you want with you?

Bossy Pants by Tina Fey. She is a great inspiration, making it to comedy's big league, *Saturday Night Live*, at a time where women were not considered capable comedians. The book is so funny and full of great life lessons. I laugh every time I read it.

6. What are some of the hurdles that you have faced as a young, female MD researcher?

There is still discrimination based on age and gender, which is really unfair and infuriating. I am still learning when to stand up and fight for justice, and when to keep quiet and accept it. Thankfully, grace and humour can go a long way in this regard.

7. What direction would you like to see for your future projects?

With my clinical epidemiology training, involvement in the development of the American College of Rheumatology (ACR)/European League Against Rheumatism (EULAR) Classification Criteria for Systemic Sclerosis, and current position of Co-Chair for the ACR subcommittee for Classification and Response Criteria, I am earning a reputation as a methodologist for classification and response criteria development.

I am currently the ACR lead for the EULAR-ACR Classification Criteria for SLE; this four-phase study is underway, and will likely take two years to complete. Working with Dr. Pope and Dr. Murray Baron, we have been successfully funded for the development of new



Dr. Johnson's research is #1 in the eyes of the CRA (and Dr. Janet Pope).

Systemic Sclerosis Subset Classification Criteria. My hope is that the novel methodologic approaches in which I have developed expertise will be applied to other rheumatic diseases.

8. What was your first paid job? How long did it last?

I was a cashier at a McDonald's in St. John's. I aspired to work drive-through, but never got that far!

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