

## Doctoral Candidate and Popular Teaching Assistant Uses Epidemiology Training to Fight HIV/AIDS in India

**TARUN BHATNAGAR** SPENT HIS CHILDHOOD playing on hospital campuses where his parents worked. Born and raised in New Delhi, India, Bhatnagar grew up in a family of physicians – his father is a radiologist, his mother a gynecologist. Going through school he appeared to be on the same path, preparing to be a clinician. But two things happened to alter his plans. During his clinical internship Bhatnagar found that managing patients made him anxious. “I was having sleepless nights and tense days,” he says. “I was not confident in my ability to handle the stress of clinical work.”

That was when Bhatnagar, currently a doctoral candidate in the School of Public Health’s UCLA/Fogarty AIDS International Training and Research Program, learned about the field of epidemiology. “I had never heard of it until my third year of medical school,” he says. Bhatnagar decided to pursue an M.D. in Preventive and Social Medicine. During his three-year study at Banaras Hindu University in Varanasi, India, he was introduced to the subject of epidemiology and took to understanding its nuances. He was taken by the prospect of applying these principles to improving the health of large numbers of people. Looking for more specialized training in epidemiology, he was introduced by his mentors in India to Dr. Roger Detels, director of the UCLA/Fogarty AIDS program. Bhatnagar decided to apply to the program, which builds the HIV/AIDS research capacity of India and other collaborating countries in an effort to control the epidemic. Bhatnagar went on to accept a position as a scientist and core faculty member of the first ICMR School of Public Health at the National Institute of Epidemiology, part of the Indian Council of Medical Research in Chennai.

After doing his coursework at UCLA he is now back in Chennai completing his dissertation on the prevalence of HIV and associated risk factors among wives of truck drivers in Namakkal District of Tamil Nadu, India. The district has the highest HIV prevalence among women in the state, and the mobility of male truck drivers is suspected to be a major factor. “Given the unequal gender relationships in Indian society, it is possible that despite knowledge of risky extramarital behaviors of their male partners, many women are unable to negotiate safe sexual practices,” Bhatnagar says. Although HIV prevalence is on the decline in Tamil Nadu, it remains high among women in Namakkal District. “I hope to determine what drives the epidemic in this area so that socio-culturally appropriate interventions can be put in place,” explains Bhatnagar.

Beyond the specialty training he was able to receive at the UCLA School of Public Health, Bhatnagar says the most valuable aspects of the experience were the lasting bonds he made with fellow Fogarty trainees from South Asian countries, as well as Detels’ “professional mentoring with a very personal touch.” Bhatnagar himself became a mentor to many at the school; he was voted Teaching Assistant of the Year in 2006-07 by the Public Health Students Association. “I really enjoyed my time with the students, and it felt good knowing I could bring smiles to confused faces,” he says. “Receiving that award in a vote by the students was very special to me, especially being a non-native.”

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