

# student profiles

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— Kabir Chopra



## A Politically Active Voice for Science

**KABIR CHOPRA** REMEMBERS SITTING IN A LABORATORY as a UCLA undergraduate in 2005, asking one of the lab’s investigators why he thought more of his colleagues didn’t get involved in the political fray. The answer – that, with funding coming from the government, many were afraid to rock the boat’ – led Chopra, a molecular, cellular and developmental biology major who had been pondering becoming a scientist, to reexamine his career ambitions.

“I said, I don’t think I can stay on the sidelines,” Chopra recalls. “Science gets used to make political points, and it always seems to take a back seat to political agendas. With so much at stake, and things moving at such breakneck speed, more scientists need to become politically active.”

While taking a year off after completing his undergraduate education to contemplate his next move, Chopra worked on the Yes on 87 campaign, an unsuccessful statewide initiative that would have supported alternative energy research and development through a tax on oil profits. The experience led Chopra to decide that he was happiest working at the interface of environmental science and policy. To get the type of graduate education that would allow him to straddle the two worlds, he applied to the school’s M.P.H. program in the Department of Environmental Health Sciences.

Now in his second year, Chopra has found his niche. Through the school’s Center for Occupational and Environmental Health he is working with faculty members John Froines and Hilary Godwin, along with Timothy Malloy, a professor in the law school, to develop policy recommendations on nanomaterials. Nanotechnology is predicted to be a \$1 trillion industry within the next decade, but there are human health and environmental safety concerns; the work on which Chopra is assisting will draw on lessons learned from policies on previous technologies, and will help to inform the new University of California Center for Environmental Impacts of Nanotechnology (see page 30).

Chopra is also helping to increase his peers’ involvement in public health-related social issues as chair of the Public Health Student Association’s social action committee. Last year, the committee held a discussion about

post-traumatic stress syndrome in relation to combat veterans and discussed how public health professionals should be prepared for the repercussions of the nation’s current military conflicts. This fall, the committee’s activities have included voter registration. “We remain non-partisan, focusing on social issues that the health field will have to deal with,” Chopra says.

Raised by parents – both with science degrees – who came to the United States from India the year before he was born, Chopra was impressed from an early age about the importance of civic participation. “Voting was always a big deal in our house,” he says. “My parents stressed that it was important to have an opinion and make it known, because we live in a country where you can do that.”

He now eagerly anticipates a career in environmental policy. “With my background I will be able to work with pure scientists as well as communicating the importance of their work with pure policy people,” Chopra says. “There are very few fields that have that kind of overlap.”

## Seeking to Make a Broader Impact on Health of Latino Children, Pediatrician Adds an M.P.H.

AS A UCLA MEDICAL STUDENT, **ALMA GUERRERO** concluded that to effectively address her goal of improving health in Latino communities, an M.D. wouldn't be enough. "I realized that we are trained as physicians to focus on individual care, but it was important to me to do something more," says Guerrero, a pediatrician who is about to complete her M.P.H. studies at the School of Public Health. "So I decided that after my residency training I would get my M.P.H. to help me better understand the factors affecting the health of a community and how to plan, implement, and evaluate programs to improve it."

Guerrero is interested in promoting health among young Latino children through a better understanding of the role of parental perceptions and cultural barriers. Under the mentorship of two of her medical school faculty members, Drs. Alice Kuo and Wendy Slusser (the latter also a member of the School of Public Health faculty), she became involved in a focus-group study at the Venice Family Clinic seeking to understand parental perceptions of young children's weight. "We found that these mothers do consider physicians to be important resources for understanding issues related to their children's weight – and that they are fairly knowledgeable on strategies to prevent overweight or manage an overweight child," Guerrero says.

When it comes to diet, her research group concluded, the problem is not that these mothers don't understand what should be done, but that their efforts to change their child's dietary habits are often undermined by other family members, such as the father and grandparents. Guerrero believes this problem might be addressed with a more family-centered approach to the issue of overweight and obesity among Latino children – bringing other family members in for at least one visit, for example. Her study also found that more emphasis needs to be placed on the importance of physical activity for this population.

After completing her degree, Guerrero plans to stay at UCLA as a junior faculty member in the medical school's Department of Pediatrics, focusing on child health policy. In particular, her goal is to promote health in Latino communities by continuing to learn more about the role of family in early childhood development and implementing community-based interventions to apply that knowledge toward better health outcomes. Guerrero recently put this concept into practice through a School of Public Health partnership with several local Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) programs. She developed a "train-the-trainer" module for WIC staff to help parents better understand how their child develops and how to have more meaningful encounters with their child's doctor around health and development.

She is confident that the M.P.H. program has prepared her well for such a career. "The knowledge and tools I have gained through this program have been invaluable," Guerrero says. "I now have the skills that will enable me to implement and evaluate programs focusing on early childhood and Latino parents. Above all, I have a much better appreciation for the importance of the life-course approach – understanding the social determinants of health and how early factors have an impact on young children for the rest of their lives."



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— Dr. Alma Guerrero