

**THE SCHOOL'S
ASSOCIATE DEAN
FOR RESEARCH
GOES TO THE
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ROSHAN BASTANI: Bringing Cancer Advances to Communities

In the more than two decades since Dr. Roshan Bastani embarked on her public health career, much has been learned about how the risk of developing certain cancers can be reduced and how some of the most common tumors can be detected in their early, treatable stages. But not everyone has benefited from these discoveries. Disparities exist in who gets certain cancers and who dies from them. These gaps – reflected in rates of potentially life-saving cancer screenings and in risk factors such as obesity and exposure to environmental carcinogens – can often be traced to socioeconomic factors.

“When an important scientific discovery is made, it doesn’t automatically translate to the population,” Bastani says, “and it’s only when a technology is adopted at the level of entire communities that you can really have an impact on population health.”

At the UCLA School of Public Health, Bastani wears several important hats. She has been the school’s associate dean for research since 2001, a period during which the school’s external grant funding has increased by approximately four-fold. Since 1990 she has served as associate director of the UCLA Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center’s Division of Cancer Prevention and Control Research, and was recently named the cancer center’s director for Cancer Disparities Research. In 2004, she spearheaded the effort to establish what is now the UCLA Kaiser Permanente Center for Health Equity, which Bastani co-directs with Dr. Antronette Yancey. (For more on the recent endowment of the center, see page 32.) The center, based in the School of Public Health, brings together more than 50 UCLA faculty members and their students, along with a large number of community-based groups, to address disparities in critical health issues.

But her administrative roles notwithstanding, the heart of Bastani's work is in the community – particularly in the low-income, ethnic minority and immigrant communities that are disproportionately affected by cancer, and where working with populations to apply what is known about prevention and early detection can save countless lives.

Bastani has developed close relationships with scores of Los Angeles-area community-based organizations over the course of her career, working with them to develop strategies for increasing cancer screening and promoting cancer-preventing behaviors among diverse populations. While there is undeniably a service component to the work, the community-based studies conducted by Bastani's group are as rigorous as any university-based clinical trial. "It's one thing to think you have a great idea for an intervention, but without sound research we don't know whether what's being proposed will make a difference," Bastani says.

Indeed, determining the best ways of bringing important cancer discoveries into communities is its own science. "It's not as if we can say, 'We now have this screening method, it's good for you,' and then everyone goes out and gets it," Bastani explains. So, with continuous funding as a principal investigator from the National Institutes of Health since 1988, she has conducted intervention trials to increase utilization of screening for a variety of tumors, starting with breast and cervical cancer, then colorectal and prostate cancer. Most recently, Bastani's focus has expanded with the advent of screening and vaccines for hepatitis B, which can cause liver cancer, and the human papillomavirus (HPV), which can cause cervical cancer.

Bastani's path to a public health career began in graduate school, where she earned her doctorate in social psychology. As part of a health psychology course, students were asked to design an intervention around a health issue. Bastani chose breast cancer for very personal reasons: Her mother had been diagnosed with the disease at a young age.

At the time mammography was relatively new, and few researchers were studying factors influencing whether women were being screened for breast cancer. Starting with her dissertation, Bastani filled that niche. She conducted studies seeking to identify barriers to mammography screening and tested interventions designed to overcome them, often including large numbers of ethnic minority populations to ensure that she could ascertain whether the strategies were working in certain groups but not others.

Drawing on her training, Bastani initially focused on psychological factors keeping women from getting mammograms. But soon after joining the UCLA School of Public Health faculty in 1990, she expanded

her focus. "I began to see that the context in which people live influences outcomes – that it's not always within an individual's control," she says. That led to her emphasis on addressing community-level disparities. In the years since, Bastani's group has forged ties with more than 150 community-based organizations, working with them on research that seeks to have a lasting impact. "Making a difference in communities requires interventions that are practical, realistic, can be integrated into existing community structures, and that the community partners are interested in adopting," Bastani says. "Otherwise you can have a great academic exercise, but it's not very useful."

Examples can be seen in Bastani's current work. One study tests an intervention aiming to increase informed decision-making by Latino men when it comes to prostate cancer screening. Bastani's group recruited some 1,400 low-income, uninsured Latino men in churches and on the streets and randomized them into a control group or an intervention group in which they engage in small-group discussions on the pros and cons of prostate cancer screening. Another current project involves a collaboration with churches in Los Angeles-area Korean neighborhoods to test an educational intervention to increase screening and prevention for hepatitis B. Koreans have among the highest rates of hepatitis B infection, which can lead to liver cancer when untreated. Bastani is also principal investigator of the UCLA Community Research in Cancer (CORICA) Network, one of eight in the nation funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and National Cancer Institute.

In addition to conducting her own research, Bastani devotes considerable effort to mentoring junior investigators, particularly those from traditionally underrepresented minority groups and those interested in working with underserved populations. Since 1990, she has actively supported and mentored more than 25 junior researchers who have gone on to obtain independent funding to conduct their own cancer control studies. All of Bastani's projects are also staffed with the school's graduate students.

Bastani is regularly reminded of the power of her group's work – often through small but powerful gestures. When testing an intervention to improve screening for colorectal cancer, she was taken aback when many subjects returned the \$25 they were paid to participate, some of them stuffing an extra \$5 or \$10 contribution into the envelope along with a note thanking the researchers for their work. "These were people with very little money, but they felt the research was so important that they wanted to contribute," Bastani says. "It was so touching. Knowing we're making a difference in the lives of people like that is very rewarding."

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—Dr. Roshan Bastani