

Sheela Basrur Student Travel Bursary Award

Lessons that will last a lifetime

The recipients of the Sheela Basrur Student Travel Bursary have put their knowledge of public health to work in impoverished communities around the world.

"I'm learning things I would never have been able to," says **Zainab Dhanani**, a master of public health student at Queen's University. She says she fell in love with East Africa upon visiting the area two years ago and thanks to the Sheela Basrur Student Travel Bursary she was able to return, this time to Mombasa, Kenya, where she is currently working with Mama Na Mtoto to build the community capacity needed to encourage safe motherhood practices and reduce maternal and child death. She's eager to get out in the field and put her academic background into action by developing interventions that make a difference. Although she had just arrived at the time of the interview in May 2011, she feels that the placement will have an impact on her future career in public health. "This experience is opening my mind and giving me another perspective," she says.



A young orphan at the Tumaini Children's Centre in Eldoret, Kenya.

During her practicum this spring, **Paige Schell** was living on a farm in Nicaragua close to San Juan del Sur. When she wasn't busy becoming an expert scorpion exterminator, she was traveling to three rural communities and one urban centre with a team of three *brigadistas* (community facilitators), a doctor and a nurse practitioner who were charged with facilitating treatment and prevention. "From parasites, to water and foodborne diseases, to domestic violence and sexual exploitation, public health presented itself everywhere," she says. Over four months Schell developed a program logic model and identified

measurable indicators. Learning, designing, and undertaking an evaluation of a public health program are skills she says she will continue to use and refine throughout her career.

"I learned more about myself and my ability to deliver health promotion in those three months than I did in the classroom. I was able to build my academic foundation," says **Tina Mehlethaler**, a 2010 Sheela Basrur Student Travel Bursary winner. She worked with street youth, developing a health promotion curriculum at a drop-in centre for young girls living in Eldoret,

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Public health practitioners lead a Tumaini Girls Session on reproductive health at the centre in Eldoret, Kenya.

About the Sheela Basrur Centre

The Sheela Basrur Centre honours the life and legacy of Dr. Sheela Basrur. Its mission is to strengthen the capabilities, knowledge, and expertise of public health professionals and to educate the public on key strategies to promote health. The centre's outreach initiatives include a series of educational events and professional development programs in support of public health renewal and leadership in Ontario.



Remembering a public health leader

Sheela Basur – “If I can help more people have a great life, then I’ll have a great life.”

Known by many as a fearless leader and advocate for public health renewal, Sheela Basur, a medical doctor and former Ontario chief medical officer of health and assistant deputy minister of public health, has an inspiring legacy that has changed the face of public health in Ontario.

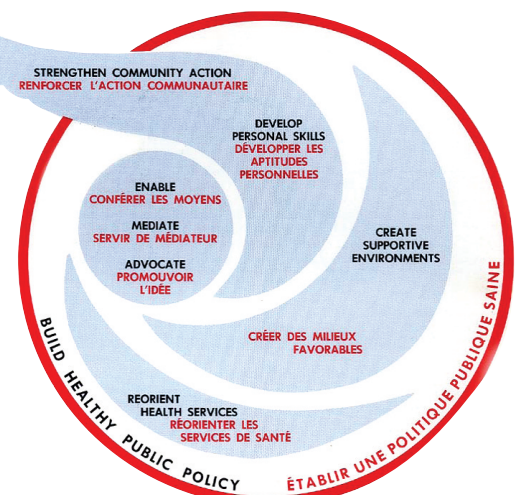
As a young general practitioner, Basur spent a year in India and Nepal, a trip that sparked her interest in public health. “I had an eye-ful of experiences,” Basur said. “I noticed there were a lot of medical decisions made on social and economic grounds.” Upon her return, she completed a master of health science degree, specializing in community health and epidemiology at the University of Toronto. It is in this very spirit that the centre’s student travel bursaries are offered in her name.

Basur became the medical officer of health for the East York Health Unit until East York merged into the City of Toronto in 1998 and she was appointed medical

officer of health for the city of Toronto. As a medical officer of health, Basur worked to strengthen community action and enable community building, believing in local-level health promotion and the social nature of public health issues. As an assistant professor in the Department of Public Health Sciences at the University of Toronto, Basur further enabled the development of personal skills in future public health professionals.

Basur is most known for her leadership role during the 2003 SARS outbreak, when she appeared front and centre answering questions from reporters in a straightforward and calm manner. She strived tirelessly to dispel myths about SARS, explaining how it was spread and how individuals could minimize risk. She then worked to create supportive environments, developing and implementing operation health protection, a three-year action plan to protect and promote the health of Ontarians.

In 2004, Basur was appointed chief medical officer of health (CMOH) and assistant deputy minister of public health in the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, a position she held until her resignation in December 2006 to undergo treatment for cancer. As CMOH,



Basur worked to reorient health services presenting a report to the Ontario legislature in 2005 on the challenges and work required to rebuild Ontario’s public health system. She was instrumental in

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Highlights of Sheela Basur’s contribution to healthy public policy:

Released a report in May 2000 linking air pollution to 1,000 premature deaths and 5,500 hospital admissions in Toronto every year. The study led to the annual Smog Summit of all three levels of government

Led the development of a Toronto bylaw restricting the use of toxic pesticides

Pushed Toronto to adopt the DineSafe program in 2001, requiring restaurants to post health inspection results in their windows (a standard followed by other Ontario health units)



Sheela Basur Symposium:

25 years after the *Ottawa Charter*

What have we achieved? What still needs to be done?



Over 550 public health professionals – from Ontario and across Canada – attended the third annual Sheela Basur Centre Symposium at the Westin Harbour Castle Convention Centre in Toronto on April 6, 2011.

The symposium focused on *Health Promotion in Ontario: 25 years after the Ottawa Charter: What have we achieved? What still needs to be done?* and featured guest speakers Irving Rootman and John Garcia, along with a panel discussion and critical reflection of the Charter and its impacts, with moderator Vivek Goel and panellists Sandra Laclé, Angela Mashford-Pringle, Ruth Grier, and John Garcia.

Rootman began the symposium with an overview of the *Ottawa Charter*, bringing attendees back to 1974 with the publication of the Lalonde Report entitled, *A New Perspective on the Health of Canadians*, a report which put health promotion in the spotlight. Since then, many achievements have helped build capacity and develop the field of health promotion, but despite advances, there is much more to be done. Rootman urged public health practitioners to keep the goal of health for all “front and centre,” and to find better ways to address environmental issues.

Garcia outlined Ontario’s major gains in health promotion, recognizing that the

province faltered under a loss of leadership and momentum in the late 1990s. Despite the fact that the *Ottawa Charter’s* influence has been undeniable, Garcia reminded participants that, “Visions fade. They need to be refreshed, renewed, and reconstituted.”

The panel discussion focused on social determinants of health and the importance of public engagement. Panellists encouraged those who are new to the public health field to believe that they too can effect change. To learn more about the event, or to read the event blog, Hot TOPHCs, visit: www.tophc.ca

Issued Condition Critical: Fixing the Smog Warning System in 2001, which led to a more accurate tool for reducing health risk during smog events (and was instrumental in developing a new national Air Quality Health Index)

Wrote a report on obesity in 2003 suggesting Torontonians have the lowest rate of physical activity in Ontario and calling for more green spaces

Instrumental in bringing about a Toronto-wide anti-smoking bylaw that took effect June 1, 2004

Helped establish the Canadian Partnership for Children’s Health and the Environment, a national coalition to reduce exposure to toxic substances by children

Produced studies on the health effects associated with toxic emissions from the Lakeview Power Plant, helping to close it in 2005

Led the push for one of the toughest anti-smoking strategies in North America, the Smoke-Free Ontario Act of May 31, 2006

Instrumental in establishing Ontario’s first arms-length public health agency

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Kenya. She described her challenges in breaking down barriers, including overcoming a lack of trust as she tried to engage the girls in a meaningful dialogue. "I focused a lot on getting them to recognize their personal strengths and trying to increase their self-esteem."



Some of the many street children in Eldoret, Kenya, gather to participate in outreach programs

Mehlethaler is still reflecting on the lessons learned during her practicum. "I probably think about some aspect of my experience there every day and without a doubt somehow it crosses my mind," she says. Adding, "It was definitely a life change experience for me." Mehlethaler is finishing her master of public health at the University of Toronto. She hopes to focus on working closely with immigrants and refugees in Toronto when she returns to work at Toronto Public Health. She applied for the bursary because she shares the passion for public health that Sheela Basrur embodied. "This is a hugely valuable learning experience for someone interested in global health."

The Sheela Basrur story ...continued from page 2

helping to create the Ministry of Health Promotion, the Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion and made many long-lasting contributions to the practice of public health, addressing the broad determinants of health.

Throughout her career, Basrur embodied the core values that underlie public health. She enabled others by supporting them and mediating difficult conflicting interests. She received the Order of Ontario on April 10, 2008, in recognition of her years of public service. Basrur died on June 2, 2008, but her legacy

lives on as an inspiration to all of us who aim to make Ontario a healthier place.



From left to right: Dr. Terrence Sullivan, chair, Public Health Ontario Board of Directors; Paul Lucas, President & CEO, GlaxoSmithKline Inc.; and Dr. Vivek Goel, President & CEO, Public Health Ontario at the Sheela Basrur Symposium on April 6, 2011.



The Sheela Basrur Centre supports public health renewal through education and knowledge transfer by delivering an outreach program consisting of a public health visitorship, a symposium, and a visiting lecturer program. Stay tuned for updates on our upcoming lecturer and visitorship programs. Visit www.sheelabasrurcentre.ca for more information.

Give to the Sheela Basrur Centre

The Sheela Basrur Centre uses the donor services of the Toronto Community Foundation to assist with financial stewardship, enabling the Centre to focus on creating positive change. To make a donation, visit: www.tcf.ca and click on *Donate Now*.

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