

BEYOND THE MASK INTERVIEW

Dr. Nadia Alam



Interviewed by Dr. Jane Cooke-Lauder, BA, MBA, DM, CMC, BTM Strategic Consultant, and Emily Hill, the Section's Administrative and Communications Coordinator

Don't challenge Dr. Nadia Alam if you really don't want something to happen. Her defining retort is "Why not?" And she then proceeds to accomplish what others have suggested is not possible. Her journey into medicine began in just that way. One of her father's friends, on observing the girl child (Nadia) in the room, unwittingly threw down the gauntlet by suggesting to her father that he "would now never get the doctor he wanted". Proof that not only boy-children become doctors followed with her acceptance into Medical School at Dalhousie, the first in her family to attend a Canadian medical school, and then graduation from Queen's Family Practice Anesthesiology (FP-A) program. Now practicing as an FP-A in Georgetown, Nadia has emerged as a strong voice for physicians. She has an effective presence on social media and is the president-elect of the Ontario Medical Association.

Language, words and cadence define and depict Nadia. A self-described writer at heart, her earliest ambition was to be awarded the Nobel Prize in English Literature. What she says has tended to resonate with others, increasingly so over the last number of years since physicians in Ontario have been without a compensation agreement and subject to arbitrary pay cuts. It was following such a pay cut announcement that a pregnant Nadia, facing an insufficiently funded maternity leave, was encouraged by her husband to 'get active'. Correspondence with her local MPP led to a visit and to a steady social media stream, including blogs that were picked up by the Huffington Post as well as other newspapers. "My aim was to help other people understand physicians the way that I see them: as beautiful, nerdy, compassionate, reasonable, collaborative, with big and all-encompassing hearts" and also to make the public and the government more aware of the limitations of the current system.

Her message was compelling- the system is in trouble and alienating physicians is the worst possible way to fix it

Nadia's comfort zone is as an advocate, a route that she strongly recommends to other physicians. She encourages her physician colleagues, when passionate about a specific issue, to create a message, identify the medium and have the courage to step forward. "Imagine the agency within yourself and that what you say matters. Be limitless". Stay away from labels, be human and be prepared to be scared. "There is that gut wrenching experience of the first day of being published by name: will anyone read it? Will they ridicule it? How best to handle the criticism so as to learn and grow? But you need not be alone." Speaking from experience, she indicated that senior leaders do reach out, seeing themselves in these younger physicians, and are ready to offer mentorship and guidance.

Her skill with words, together with her ability to get things done, has resulted in a number of leadership roles, including class president in medical school followed by chief resident during residency. "I fell into leadership positions. I did not seek them out. But at the same time, I could not ignore the opportunity since physicians really need the change. It would have been irresponsible to do so". And yet, Nadia finds the word 'leadership' to be loaded. Leaders have a responsibility to their communities; leaders are expected to do something with the influence they have garnered. Leadership can feel like a burden. It is frightening as other people are watching and judging. "Most identified leaders are male. Women do leadership differently, through teaching, educating, creating social networks of influence, influencing. I did not go into the profession to be in the public eye. I prefer to stay unaware of the influence I have – even though my friends are laughing at me."

Nadia may prefer to be unaware of the influence she has. But others are not. The shift to medical politics occurred after she was asked by popular TV host, Steve Paikin, as to when she intended to run for political office. Recognizing that this would mean giving up being a doctor for a world that she didn't respect, her decision was to become an even more influential voice, a voice for positive change, from within the healthcare system. An early realization was that she needed to start putting forward solutions and in developing these solutions: "I could apply my physician training to the ailments of the healthcare system that increasingly, I was coming to believe, was experiencing

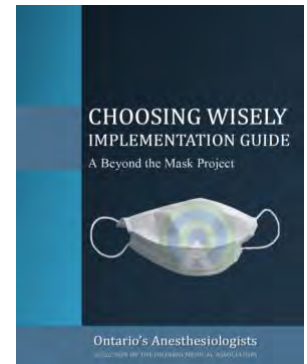
its biggest transformation since the 1960s. I think the system as it was constructed in the 1960s is unsustainable since it doesn't match what the 21st century needs." With no medical politics mentor, she brought together a support network of physician and non-physician friends who both challenge and support her. Staying open to possibilities and looking beyond the conventional wisdom are hallmarks of her creed, a creed that also recognizes the importance of being well informed. Completing a Masters' program in the UK that covers the design of health systems around the world is thus a 2018 objective. "Given the complexities of the situation, a single payer system is likely not sustainable. Too many patients are slipping through the cracks. Collaboration, including horizontal networking and engagement with patients, is required as is an understanding of the myriad of interdependencies. It will take a big village to figure out and implement the solution or solutions". One of her major concerns is that "as physicians, we have become used to so many 'new norms': we are like frogs in the pot of boiling water not recognizing that we need to jump out. Physician burnout is at new heights. And yet, in order to lead this change, we must be able to imagine a different future that encompasses all parts of the system".

This self-described 'scrappy boxer' is changing the dynamics of medical politics. Many of Ontario's physicians see themselves in her stories and are mobilizing, recognizing that a revolution is taking place. Nadia remains confident that if she can speak out, so can others; that the torch will be passed on and truth will continue to be told to power. While she describes physicians as a "strange tribe, vulnerable behind our work, overworked and often fractious with each other," she also sees common stories and an increasing ability to pull together as witnessed by the expanding working relationships between FP-As and Anesthesiologists. In closing, she exhorted her colleagues to "do what is necessary to make your own lives, AND those of your patients, better". Given her track record, it may not be wise to bet against this force of nature and her determination to improve the healthcare system through the engagement of physicians.

We thank Nadia for her dedication to medicine, leadership and advocacy and look forward to hearing about her continued support for physicians in Ontario.

Choosing Wisely Updates - CAS CWC Recommendations

CW Implementation Guide: Section Chair, Chris Harle, was invited by Choosing Wisely Canada to provide an overview of the process of developing the Implementation Guide on Thursday December 7, 2017 as part of the ongoing series, *Choosing Wisely Talks*. Click here to access the recording. Following the successful launch to members over the summer, we are seeking ways to share this work nationally and, as requested by section members, to continue to update and promote it provincially. Stay tuned for updates and in the meantime, should you have any questions or want to share a CW implementation story, please get in touch with Emily.



Health Quality Ontario Reports: Health Quality Ontario released the latest Hospital Performance Series report on December 4th, 2017. The report features hospital-level data to support the reduction of unnecessary pre-operative tests for low-risk surgeries, which is aligned with Choosing Wisely Canada recommendations.

These reports were emailed to hospital CEOs. They include comparative provincial data, suggested change ideas to support hospital-specific quality improvement efforts, and also a new year of data: April 1st, 2016- March 31, 2017. To learn more about the report, visit: www.hqontario.ca/hospitalreport. If you are interested in receiving your hospital's report, please contact hospitalreport@hqontario.ca

Meet Your Beyond the Mask Working Group... Dr. Kyle Kirkham

Dr. Kyle Kirkham has been an instrumental member of our Beyond the Mask working group since joining in 2016. He was one of the lead advisory committee members for the development of our *Choosing Wisely Implementation Guide*. Kyle has also been influential in our networking and engagement efforts. He is the CAS Choosing Wisely Canada Chair and sits on the Ontario Surgical Quality Improvement Network and Choosing Wisely Ontario provincial steering committees. Kyle has connections with the HQO surgical quality improvement program, is engaged at the Ontario Medical Association and a strong advocate for our Beyond the Mask initiative.

Dr. Kyle Kirkham trained as an anesthesiologist at the University of Toronto and obtained a fellowship in regional anesthesia at Toronto Western Hospital. He is currently a lecturer at the University of Toronto in the Faculty of Medicine. He is the director of the Anesthesia Preadmission Clinic at Women's College Hospital where he works to implement the quality improvement efforts that the BTM campaign has championed. We thank Kyle for stepping up and going Beyond the Mask and we look forward to his continued support in 2018!

