

Ishak Elkhali finds policy work creates opportunities to improve health, change lives

By Melody Finnemore
For The Scribe

Given the significant body of research that shows the link between exposure to sun and skin cancer — and Oregon’s high rate of melanoma when compared nationally — medical student **Ishak Elkhali** was shocked when he learned that the state’s schools were not allowed to distribute sunscreen to students.

Because of an active ingredient in most commercial sunscreens, schools were required to have a doctor’s note before a student could use the protective product at school, according to Oregon Health & Science University.

That has changed, thanks in part to the work of Elkhali, his fellow student members of OHSU’s **Health Policy Interest Group** and faculty experts, who helped champion the passage of House Bill 3041. The new law, which took effect last July, allows students across the state to use sunscreen at school.

For Elkhali, a second-year student with a strong interest in policy and its relationship to health, the victory provided a unique learning experience in understanding how a bill becomes a law, from the research necessary to support legislation to the legal process required for passage.

“We took trips down to Salem to testify on behalf of our bill. We did a little bit of

lobbying and that was a very interesting experience,” he said. “Governor Kate Brown invited us to the signing ceremony and gave us a copy of the bill. I even have a pen from the signing ceremony.”

Elkhali’s interest in policy also led him to participate in the medical-legal partnership (MLP) model OHSU is developing in partnership with Health Share of Oregon and local law students and attorneys.

As The Scribe reported in July 2015, the MLP is designed to help the growing number of people who are living in poverty, homeless, and in need of assistance with food and other basics.

“We know there are a lot of things that go on in people’s lives that affect their health that can’t necessarily be solved by physicians or a health care team,” **Rachel Arnold, JD, Health Share of Oregon’s** contracting and provider relations manager, said in the July article. “People without secure housing, heat and electricity face health issues, and mold in the home can affect a person’s health status.”

Through the MLPs, legal professionals train health care teams to identify social and legal needs and refer patients to a legal team, which then provides appropriate legal services. The legal services provided to patients are limited to civil legal service and will not include criminal law issues or issues pertaining to medical malpractice or HIPAA violations, according to Health Share of Oregon.

“These are (services) like income support and social security so they don’t have to make choices about whether they are going to eat or buy medication,” Arnold said.

She is working with OHSU’s **Ken Gatter, MD, JD,** and **Laura Russell,** a student at **Lewis & Clark Law School,** to develop the model for Oregon. Gatter’s special interest is the interaction of health care and the law, and he serves as vice chair of anatomic pathology at OHSU. He also was one of Arnold’s professors as an adjunct professor at Willamette University’s College of Law.

Arnold said the pilot project, which will begin this year at OHSU’s Richmond Clinic, is twofold. It will test the MLP model with a discrete set of patients at the clinic and the outcomes will be published. In addition to improving patient health, the project aims to reduce the use of health care services, with the goal of lowering the cost of care over one year.

The second piece will allow project partners to collaborate with an array of stakeholders to craft a model that could be used throughout the state. This effort will include developing a vision, strategy and business plan and assessing the needs in various geographic regions, she said.

Elkhali is working with Gatter on the MLP’s research proposal and said he hopes to do a clinical rotation at the Richmond Clinic while the pilot is being developed.

“That’s been a really interesting process of seeing just how complicated



Members of OHSU’s Health Policy Interest Group who helped pass House Bill 3041 include, from left, medical students Suzy Funkhouser, Larissa Guran, Elizabeth Sokolowski, Sylvia Peterson-Perry, Annie Buckmaster and Ishak Elkhali.

Photo courtesy of Oregon Health & Science University

initiating clinical research is,” he said. “I think a deeper understanding of research is critical to any physician, and seeing the development process will help me to better understand the research I will be reading and, ultimately, applying to my practice.” •

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