

# ARVINKUMAR BHANA

## AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Becoming an Executive Director of the Human and Social Development Research Programme (2007)
- Joining the newly-formed Human Sciences Research Council as Director of Research in the Child, Youth, Family and Social Development Research Programme which brought together an elite team (2002)
- Head of Department of Psychology at the University of Durban-Westville (UDW) now the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) (1998)

## DEFINING MOMENT

Being admitted into a PhD programme at one of the top universities in the United States in which he competed against 400 top-rated students from the United States.

## WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

He is an avid hiker and he has come to appreciate the incredible beauty of the natural heritage in South Africa, as well as places like Kilimanjaro in Tanzania and Machu Picchu in Peru.

## A CAREER DEDICATED TO MENTAL HEALTH

Arvinkumar Bhana's passion for community psychology was a natural progression of his political conscience, which first manifested while working as a clinical psychologist in Durban in the 1980s. "A political agenda infused much of my work at the time," he says of those years. "Part of my activism involved working with groups under threat of assault from security police and other state apparatus, trying to bolster their psychosocial and mental health and help them cope with what they were faced with every day." It was also at this time that he knew he needed more than just clinical training to be able to make a major impact on South African health systems.

It was only several years later, when he enrolled for a PhD in clinical community psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, that his scientific training began in earnest. There, he learned the true value of science and research in promoting change. "My training at the University of Illinois strongly reinforced how to link mental health issues to people's lived experience, and how this knowledge could be used to strengthen and improve their lives.

Everything I did thereafter was about asking, what is the evidence, and how well is that evidence established? How can we use this to make a difference?"

He got his first taste for the power of scientific thinking during his time as a knowledge-hungry undergraduate, studying psychology at the then UDW. Having had no access to a library where he grew up, he spent large amounts of time in the university library, reading anything he could get his hands on. "It was as if all this knowledge had been kept from me, and I needed to take it all in."

His oldest brother was one of the first in the family and in the community to attend a university, and along with the culture of literacy and a diverse range of books at home, this set him on a course of lifelong enquiry. "Studying psychology showed me how science can discover truth or determine merit and validity. The power of the scientific method was and still is fascinating to me."

Now an NRF B-rated scientist and Chief Research Specialist at the Health Systems Research Unit of the South African Medical Research Council and an Honorary Associate Professor at the Centre for Rural Health at UKZN, Bhana applies his passion for knowledge, scientific thinking and community health to expanding public health services to include the treatment of mental health for patients in primary care.

After completing his PhD, Bhana realised that knowledge about psychological health is quite poor in general, and what little we know comes from the developed world and may not be relevant to South Africa. For that reason, his early work looked to better understand the perceptions and stigmas around mental health in South Africa, where no information had existed before. This also gave him a better grasp of where he really wanted to focus his research efforts in future. He started working in the area of substance abuse as he saw the devastating impact it could have on impoverished communities.

## ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH

Another area that he chose to work in was adolescent mental health. One of his major research projects was the Collaborative human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and Adolescent Mental Health Project (CHAMPSA), which aimed to



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improve resilience among adolescents and their caregivers in poor households and impoverished families, particularly those with adolescents facing health challenges associated with the growing HIV/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) epidemic.

This theme of strengthening and empowering families to protect children's mental and physical health continues in his research today. However, the work has evolved over time: the projects have grown larger and now aim for population-scale interventions rather than working at the family or community level.

He has participated in several large collaborative projects with other African countries that have continued to build local knowledge around public mental health. In fact, he says that collaborations began to strengthen his own work by providing new perspectives and solutions as soon as he completed his PhD. "At that time, PhD researchers in this field were few and far between in South Africa—I suddenly became part of an exclusive club of like-minded researchers. We started to share interests and form partnerships and collaborations." Now, some of his most important work has come out of those collaborations—projects like CHAMPSA, CHAMP+SA and the VUKA Family Programme to supporting perinatally HIV-infected youth in South Africa.

In recent years, his collaborations have changed from bilateral collaborations to multinational and he works with research programmes like the Mental Health and Poverty Project (MHaPP), Programme for Improving Mental Health Care (PRIME), the Comorbidity of AIDS/HIV Affective Disorders and Long-Term Health (COBALT) trial, Mental Health Integration Project (MHINT), the African Regional Partnerships for Scaling up Child Mental Health Implementation Research (SMART-Africa), and the newly-established Southern African

Research Consortium for Mental Health Integration (S-MHINT). All these projects seek ways to support and empower those with mental health issues in the developing world and to provide evidence-based knowledge of mental health in the African context.

"The more we collaborate, the more we build towards true partnerships between us and the more developed countries. We are learning to innovate together in building the international science of public mental health," says Bhana.

He works closely with national and provincial departments of health, and the projects he works on have contributed to public mental health policy. "There is a critical need for mental health to be part of an everyday public health service experience, not a specialised service and only for those who can afford it. That's our mission."

On top of multiple international collaborations and an active research career that has produced more than a hundred journal articles, Bhana has served as the editor for several international mental health journals, sat on the UNESCO Global Advisory Group on HIV and Sex Education, and has been Lead Investigator at the NRF's Department of Science and Technology Department of now Department of Science and Innovation Centre of Excellence in Human Development since 2015.

He says his motivation as a researcher comes from a desire to make a significant difference. "If you really want to be a great scientist, the first lesson to learn is humility, because there is so much you don't know and so much you can learn from others. You just have to keep learning and doing."

2020

# Legends of South African Science II

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

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Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), (2019). Legends of South African Science II.

[Online] Available at: DOI <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/assaf.2018/0036>

<http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11911/146>

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