

Surgeon Profile Series

Toral Gathani

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Toral Gathani is a senior clinical research fellow in epidemiology in the Nuffield Department of Population Health at the University of Oxford, and consultant oncoplastic breast surgeon at Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust. In 2022 she was awarded a Hunterian Lecture, and the courtesy title of Hunterian Professor, by the Royal College of Surgeons of England for her work on the associations of ethnicity and breast cancer. She is a senior research fellow at Green Templeton College, and a member of the national Clinical Advisory Panel for Cancer Research UK, the Academic and Research Committee for the UK Association of Breast Surgery and the Executive Board for the India Oxford Initiative at the University of Oxford.

She was born and raised in North-West London and studied medicine at the University of St Andrews, where she was awarded a First class degree in her BSc, and Guy's and St Thomas' Medical School where she qualified with Honours with a Distinction in Surgery. Core and higher surgical training were undertaken on rotations in the North West Thames Deanery. She made a fairly early decision to specialise in breast surgery and rotated through the major breast units in the region. She was awarded a competitive national oncoplastic fellowship at the Nottingham Breast Institute in 2011, and appointed to her current academic consultant post at Oxford in 2013.

So far, so conventional. However, there are two unconventional decisions that she made during her training which would prove to be instrumental in the development of her academic career. The first was to choose to pursue a higher research degree in the field of epidemiology and public health. After completing her core surgical training, Toral joined the Cancer Epidemiology Unit in 2003 and enjoyed a very happy couple of years undertaking the research for her MD thesis. Her enthusiasm for epidemiology prompted the second decision to take a year out of training in the UK, to live and work in Bombay in a hybrid clinical research year. During this year, she spent time working as a registrar in a busy breast surgical unit of a government cancer hospital, and in parallel established a case control study in 12 centres across India to investigate risk factors for breast cancer in Indian women, and in particular lifelong vegetarian dietary habits. Through this work, she gained a deep understanding of the challenges of breast cancer care and control in different resource settings and started to shape the future global health research questions she would consider important to answer.

Since her consultant appointment, Toral has developed her main research interests in the associations of ethnicity and breast cancer in the UK, and of breast cancer as a global health challenge. She recognises that her academic interests are heavily influenced by her background as the daughter of East African Indian parents and a powerful need for her work to be connected and relevant to the communities from which she comes, here in the UK and overseas.

Up until the pandemic, she was routinely travelling and working in India and is a past recipient of a British Medical Association Humanitarian Award for public health projects in Assam, India. She has been awarded grants from the Global Challenges Research Fund in 2018 to conduct a large cross-sectional study in rural Bihar investigating the burden of non-communicable diseases and access to primary healthcare systems. In 2020, she successfully led a bilateral research team with collaborators in the North East Region of India through the first stage of the Affordable Approaches to Cancer challenge for a study to evaluate the use of digital health technologies in community health workers to facilitate the early diagnosis of cancer in rural India. The impact of the pandemic on funds for non-infectious disease global health research is a real concern for her but she remains optimistic that the

funding opportunities will improve over time and plans to travel to India later this year to meet with collaborators.

Toral is hugely proud that the Royal College of Surgeons has recognised the importance of epidemiological research on ethnicity and breast cancer by awarding her a Hunterian Lecture and she is currently developing a UK wide Ethnicity and Breast Cancer working group and exploring ways of improving diversity in Public and Patient Involvement supported by a grant from the Association of Breast Surgery. All of her research is focused on translational public health benefit, and seeks to understand the underlying drivers for observed variations in breast cancer incidence, outcomes and experience of care in different ethnic groups, to inform the interventions needed to address them.

Developing an academic surgical career is not easy and takes time, effort and resilience. Continuing to practice surgery is important to her as she enjoys the satisfaction of patient contact and clinical work helps inform the relevance of the epidemiological research. She feels incredibly lucky to have had opportunity to develop in two disciplines that are connected by the thread of breast cancer. There is no single key to success in her opinion, but an ability to not be afraid to make unconventional decisions and to choose differently to what may be considered the norm is important. But most importantly for her, there must be passion and self-belief to fuel motivation when times are tough and help navigate the obstacles that are an inevitable part of a career in academic surgery.