Change Agents

A new kind of researcher moves from practice to research to policy without missing a beat

The Eastern Mediterranean region has seen a disturbing rise in non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in recent years, especially cancer, obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disorders. “Unfortunately,” says FHS Professor Abla Sibai (MS ’86) “there are very few local researchers working in this area presently.” That situation is changing because of the Scholars in Health Research Program (SHARP) that AUB launched in July 2013. “Our goal,” explains SHARP Director Ghada El-Hajj Fuleihan (BS ’79, MD ’83) “is to graduate ‘change agents’ who are able to bridge the worlds of research and academia, clinical practice management, and health policy.”

SHARP is funded by a four-year $863,000 National Institutes of Health (NIH) grant, one of only two awards granted to institutions outside the United States. It includes a summer certificate program and an MS in health research offered jointly by FM and FHS, the first of its kind in the region. The program is unique, offering an intensive summer course in quantitative methods, a multidisciplinary curriculum, hands-on
training, and solid research opportunities delivered by dedicated scholars from FM, FHS, FAFS, and HSON. Support from VP Dean Sayegh and Provost Dallal is also critical.

Two recent FM graduates are already putting their knowledge to the test in postdoctoral fellowships at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. Dr. Victor Nauffal (BS ’09, MD ’13) credits the program with giving him all the skills he needs—and more. Dr. Mohamad El Zein (BS ’08, MD ’12) describes SHARP as “a turning point in my career.”

Two Harvard Medical School hospitals are also home for SHARP graduates. “Words are not enough to describe the role that SHARP played in my intellectual, personal, and career growth,” says Dr. Maroun Yammine (BS ’09, MD ’13), currently at Brigham and Women’s Hospital. Dr. Rami Kantar (BS ’08, MD ’13), who is at Massachusetts General Hospital, advises all physicians to “take the types of courses—library sciences and informatics, biostatistics, medical ethics—that we took last summer.”

Nauffal, El Zein, and Yammine presented projects on cardiovascular diseases and diabetes, completed under the mentorship of Robert Habib (BS ’84) at recent meetings at the NIH, the Annual Meeting of Thoracic Surgery, and the American College of Cardiology.

Habib, who directs the SHARP summer program, credits the students for much of the success of the program so far. “We could not imagine that our students would be so eager to learn—and that they would be able to produce—and publish—such excellent work so quickly.”

Three SHARP summer graduates, Maya Barake (BS ’02, MD ’06), Karine Al Feghali (BS ’08, MD ’12), and Marlene Chakhtoura, are now enrolled in the MS program. “In just my first semester, I was able to design a randomized controlled trial comparing the effect of different doses of vitamin D administered during pregnancy on maternal and neonatal health outcomes and have submitted it for funding. It is a subject I have been interested in for a long time,” says Chakhtoura.

“The speed of SHARP’s outstanding success speaks to the need for this program, the competitiveness of its graduates, the dedication of its summer program director, and our skilled faculty. But this is only the start. We plan to introduce SHARP to the region and offer blended learning modules, so this novel program becomes more accessible to health-care professionals outside Lebanon,” reports Dr. El-Hajj Fuleihan.