

Jon Gilbert Fox



## A HEALTHY INTEREST

**T**O THOSE WHO KNOW HER, Sandhya (Sandy) Rao’s enrollment in medical school comes as little surprise. Rao ’19 has been focused on a career in medicine since childhood, when she watched her mother, a neurologist, at work. “When I was a little girl, I told my mom I wanted to be a doctor, too, and she tried to discourage me because it’s such an all-consuming profession,” says Rao with a chuckle. But Rao was not to be dissuaded. “In New Jersey where I grew up, I attended a health care high school where students could work in a hospital, shadow physicians, etc. I loved it—the science and anatomy were fascinating to me and I knew that medicine was where I belonged.”

Rao went on to earn a bachelor’s degree in neuroscience at Hamilton College, then interviewed at the Geisel School of Medicine after hearing from a Hamilton professor that Dartmouth’s faculty practiced a friendly, hands-on approach to education. “Hamilton was wonderful because I was able to get to know my professors, and I wanted to have that experience in medical school as well.” An engaging conversation with her Dartmouth interviewer about nutrition—a keen interest of Rao’s—convinced her that Geisel was a good fit. “The school really cares about its students and student initiatives,” she says. “When you approach faculty with ideas, they’re always very supportive. They never say, ‘No.’ Instead, their response is always, ‘How are we going to do this?’”

Rao should know—since she set foot on campus, she has been proposing ideas, driven by her interests in nutrition and medical education. Over the past three years, she has championed a series of initiatives aimed at educating physicians on the important roles that nutrition and healthy eating play in overall health. “Nutrition is key to health, yet only a handful of medical schools require the Liaison Committee on Medical Education’s (LCME) recommended minimum of 25 hours of education on the subject...over the course of four years!”

Rao is doing her best to change these numbers at Geisel. In October of 2015, shortly after arriving at Dartmouth, she joined the Complementary & Alternative Medicine (CAM) Interest Group. Here she worked along with two other students to create a 10-week nutrition elective for first- and second-year medical students, employing lectures and interactive cooking lessons to provide guidance on eating healthy in medical school and integrating nutrition into patient care. And since January of 2017, she has been a student leader in the Nutrition in Medical Education Program, a task force created by the Geisel Medical Education Committee to incorporate nutrition into the curriculum. Working with a dietician, a health coach, and Auden McClure, MD, MPH—an assistant

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professor of Pediatrics, Community & Family Medicine, director of the Culinary Medicine Program, and a classically trained chef—Rao helped develop a five-session elective that explains the importance of various food groups, outlines easy-to-cook meals, and offers medical students information they can share with patients.

Although brimming with ideas, Rao hasn’t yet decided what branch of medicine will be her focus. Given her interest in nutrition, she says that she thinks endocrinology would be a good fit, but now realizes that healthy eating plays an important role in every specialty. Whatever she chooses, Rao is confident she’ll always be teaching others the importance of healthy eating and effective communication. “You need to be able to explain to patients what’s wrong and how to make healthier lifestyle choices so they can help themselves get better,” she asserts. “As a doctor, you may see a patient once every few months, but they’re going to be dealing with their illness every day, so they need clear instruction on what to do.

“I would love to teach in medical schools as well as in the community,” Rao concludes. “It would be great to teach physicians new techniques for educating their patients on nutrition as well as offer patients a course on the basics of gardening and lead them on educational trips to the grocery store. We’ve got to get healthy eating habits and practical knowledge out there!”

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