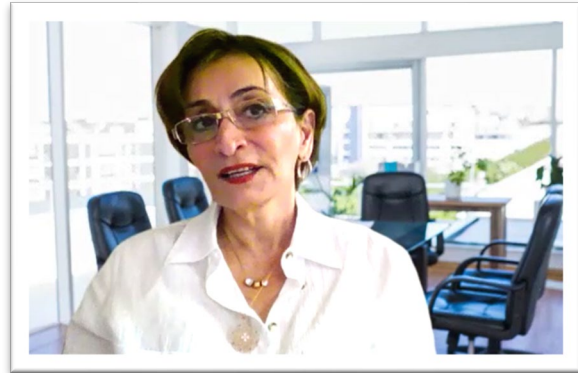


Interview with

**Dr. Mandana Vahabi, RN, PhD,
FCAN**

**2023 CCRA Awardee for
Distinguished Service to
Cancer Research**



How have your research accomplishments contributed to the reduction of barriers to the delivery of equitable cancer care?

My research focuses on cancer screening and prevention through a health equity lens to help reduce system level, provider level, and patient level barriers to screening. In particular, I have focused my research on cancer screening for populations typically described as “hard to reach,” taking a community engaged approach. My research contributes to the reduction of barriers to the delivery of equitable cancer care through a multi-pronged approach that includes community engagement, contextually relevant and appropriate information to advance health literacy and offering innovative approaches to a screening. I work closely with marginalized population who face systemic challenges in accessing health that range from discrimination, stigma, service accessibility such as distance, transportation issues and service availability from lack of a family physician to low health literacy.

My participatory mixed methods research has identified innovative approaches like HPV self sampling, community peer ambassadors and de-stigmatizing community based sexual health education as powerful tools to reduce disparities. For instance, to normalize screening for cervical cancer and educate on cervical cancer and HPV, I am utilizing the novel approach of culturally appropriate art-based education. To date, this has been a highly effective method for community outreach in my work. I have found that storytelling and a highly visual approach are more likely to be taken on board and lead to an increased willingness to test for HPV and empower women to take charge of their health. My current projects for marginalized urban and rural communities in India and sex workers in Ontario adopt these methods for educating participants about cervical cancer screening and have shown success in increasing knowledge and improving the breakdown of stigma in health conversations in general and on the topic of cancer, in particular, and has led to uptake of screening by these participants.

How can Canada realize its commitment to health equity?

I believe Canada can realize its commitment to health equity by addressing the root causes of poor health that are heavily influenced by the socio-economic and political conditions in which a person is born, live, work, play and age. Hence, achieving health equity cannot be achieved by relying on the health sector only. The social, economic, and environmental ministries are equally responsible and should be committed to working closely with the health ministry to ensure that their policies consider health as their utmost priority. Health equity can be achieved only

through a commitment to “health in all” policies. A “health in all” policies action plan would advance progress toward a socially equitable and healthy future for Canadians.

What is needed to facilitate the effective implementation of evidence-based research into care?

In my opinion, effective implementation of evidence-based research into care not only needs a receptive climate but also a good fit between the evidence-based research and intended adopters’ needs and values. Hence, it is crucial to actively engage the community and understand their needs, concerns and factors that deter their uptake of evidence-based research. We need to ensure that the evidence-based research addresses the community's specific needs and is delivered in a manner that respects their beliefs, values, and norms. Engaging equity-deserving communities and seeking their input and advice throughout the process will facilitate the implementation process.

What words of advice do you have for the next generation of researchers committed to making a difference in reducing the cancer burden?

Individuals and communities affected by a specific health issue such as cancer seldom have access to the knowledge generated through research. Hence, the next generation of researchers must be trailblazers in disrupting this “knowledge-to-practice” chasm through knowledge mobilization and stakeholder engagement. Involving equity-deserving communities in all aspects of research projects from framing the question to design, implementation and evaluation are a must for our new generation to consider when they undertake a research project or any project relevant to the people involved.

How can the next generation become myth-busters to help reduce the distrust in science that has increased since the pandemic?

I think they really do need to build the trust between themselves and the communities or groups that they are targeting. During COVID-19, what happened is that people didn't really think that they were getting the relevant information that they needed. I believe that what we need to do is to engage people from the start, trying to help them understand the issue and capturing their perspectives in terms of their priorities, their needs—whether it is related to the knowledge itself or the use of an intervention. I also think that equal or symmetric power between the researchers and the communities they are working with is an important way to cultivate trust. Once we get buy-in, it becomes much easier to move forward and implement the intervention or strategies.