

INDIE MAJOR PODCAST

9/18/24 Suheera Haq

Individualized Major: Social Determinants of Reproductive Healthcare

Ken:

This is Indie Major, a show devoted to the wide-ranging stories and visions of individualized majors at the University of Connecticut. I'm your host, Ken Cormier.

We are here with Suheera Haq. Hi Suheera. Thanks for coming in.

Suheera:

Thank you for having me.

Ken:

We are going to talk about your individualized major here at UConn so why don't you tell us, what's the name of your major?

Suheera:

So the name of my major is Social Determinants of Reproductive Health Care, and basically the essential theme is like diving into topics within women's healthcare and like, people who have uteruses. And the reason why I decided to take on this individualized major is because of my interest in women's health and reproduction.

Ken:

So did you come to UConn with a different major and switched over, or how did that all work?

Suheera:

Yeah. So when I applied to UConn, I was just the classic biology major, and I am on the pre-med track. So right now, I'm an MCB major, so still in like the biology field, but I'm pursuing a dual-degree, so I'm getting my Bachelor of Science in MCB, and then I'm pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in my individualized major.

Ken:

Okay, so MCB is molecular and cell biology.

Suheera:

Yes, yes.

Ken:

And that's a popular major for students who want to go into medicine?

Suheera:

Yeah, very popular. I'd say, like, you know, MCB, molecular cell biology and like, you know, PNB, you know, Physio and Neuro. Those are like the big ones for pre-med.

Ken:

Right. Right. And so you were doing that major, and then you decided you wanted to expand out to do another major that brought what?

Suheera:

I kind of realized like, as much as I kind of obviously enjoyed, like, doing my MCB curriculum and like going through my classes. You know, I realized I kind of wanted to, like, take a different side of medicine and like a different perspective because I feel like social determinants of health care is something that is very prevalent in the healthcare field, and as much as it helps to know about mechanisms and like understanding, like, the biological reasons for like diseases and like healing, there's also another side to healing, which is the socioeconomic factors, which could impact the health care that someone receives.

Ken:

So it's just sort of broadening your perspective beyond the science, I guess, right? Although it's a different kind of science, it's a little bit more like the social science side?

Suheera:

Yeah I would say it kind of like touches upon that area because, like you have to sort of analyze how different like infrastructures in society may benefit some communities, but also disadvantage other communities. So being able to understand how these forces are working together can also impact someone's health outcome at the end, because you can have, you can know how to heal someone in a biological sense, but if we're not meeting or if we're not

getting the proper healthcare provided for them, then they're not going to heal.

Ken:

Right. Right. And so social determinants is a really interesting phrase. And we actually have a course at UConn, I think, in Allied Health, that's specifically about social determinants of health. Right? And how would you describe, is there an example of how would you describe social determinants of health? Like, what does that mean?

Suheera:

Yeah. So it is kind of like a phrase I heard a lot, and I, too, was, like, a little bit, like, confused when I started learning about the subject, but it's basically, like factors in our environment that could possibly lead to different health outcomes. So like, there's different ways your health is determined. That's not simply like what the doctors prescribing you when you see them. There's also, like, how you get to the doctor. Are you even able to access a doctor? Will the doctor treat you in the right way without any biases or prejudice? So there's like certain factors that can, I guess, like, socially affect your health care outcome. So that's why I really wanted to delve into these factors.

Ken:

So one person who is suffering some sort of medical event could have a clear path toward healing. Was another person with the same biological factors, could basically have a much riskier or uncertain path toward healing, really simply based on their access, social situation and that sort of stuff.

Suheera:

Yeah, It's actually exactly that, I would say. Like, there are some people who have, like, the privilege to be able to get healed, but there are other people that might not have the same privilege, and that could actually affect, like generations to come.

Ken:

So you're finding courses in all sorts of different departments that touch on these issues in different ways, right? So what are some of the disciplines or departments that you're taking courses from?

Suheera:

Yeah. So in the past, like, I've taken wigs courses, like women and gender studies. I've also taken classes in allied Health. I'm also in a lab, which is part of the Allied Health Department. Next semester, I plan to take courses in the nursing department, which I've never done before. So I'm very excited to do that. And I've also done courses in like anthropology, and I'm planning to do courses in sociology.

Ken:

Wow. So that's a big, wide array of disciplines. Was there one thing that inspired you to go in this direction? What kind of led you down this path?

Suheera:

Yeah, I would say this major is very personal to me because it kind of does stem from my own childhood and, like, sort of, like, my

relationship with my mother because she had had struggles with infertility, and, like, having children was, like, a big sort of, like, a very big deal for her. So it was kind of, like, seeing how, like the struggle of, like, motherhood and, like, how all different mothers faced different types of problems when entering motherhood and even after motherhood kind of made me realize that I wanted to have a part in that while also having, like, a sort of medical and, like, social view on those issues.

Ken:

Now, you mentioned earlier that you're working in a lab setting in allied health. Hmm. Are you also working for your other major in a lab setting for molecular and cell biology?

Suheera:

Yeah, I am. That's kind of what I'm doing this summer. I'm working in a lab in like the pharmacy department. So that kind of delves into, like, the molecular cell biology for, like, my honor's thesis. So that's what I'm doing for this summer.

Ken:

So what does that work kind of look like? What are you doing in the lab?

Suheera:

So it's kind of like bench work, like immunohistochemistry, Western blotting. My project for this summer is like I'm basically targeting a certain protein that is present in like lung inflammation. And then, like, future projects will be maybe directed towards how I can

combat the adverse effects of lung inflammation. So in that way, I'm sort of like learning, like biological mechanisms of how like inflammation can affect the respiratory system.

Ken:

So, is there a faculty member you're working with specifically for that?

Suheera:

Yes, yeah. I'm in, like, the Smith lab of Pulmonary Toxicology. He's in the pharmacy department. Great lab. I've had a great time so far this summer, and I thoroughly enjoy working with him.

Ken:

Awesome. So how does that look different? That kind of lab work look different from what you describe as the lab work you're doing in Allied Health?

Suheera:

Yeah, I would say it's very different because, like in lab work, like, as maybe other people in science majors know. Sometimes it's very, like tedious because we're just undergrads, and, like, we don't have sort of the ability to, like, you know, jump further as much as you want to. So like, being able to, like, nail the basics, like, basic procedures, like, I'm pipetting, I'm incubating things, I'm heating things up. It's kind of like very procedural, like versus the work I did in allied health. It's more like it's a little bit similar where I'm In allied health, I'm like, working on like data collection and sorting out, like quantitative data. In that sense, I'm like sort of like looking at what

people's responses are to surveys, and then I'm like categorizing that data, which could then be used to sort of help these women who are filling out the surveys. So it's kind of like a different approach.

Ken:

Is the lab work in Allied Health? Is that work that is going to be the goal at some point to, you know, write something for Social Sciences Journal or something like that? Is that one of the things that you plan?

Suheera:

Yeah, I guess the end goal is to sort of, like, get this data to sort of, I guess, well, I guess I should first talk about, like, what the data is about.

Ken:

Right.

Suheera:

The surveys are basically for, like, recently pregnant mothers who have gotten, like, gestational diabetes. So it's a big, like, lifestyle change because your diet is, like, very important. You know, you have to maintain a specific diet and that could be very hard for someone who is not only going through a pregnancy, but, like, now has to change their like the way they eat. So basically, we have, like surveys for these mothers, where they go on and they talk about how, how they see nutritional advice on social media and how that like impacts their behaviors, like if they sort of believe

like misinformation or if they can spot misinformation, because like social media misinformation could also like impact these populations. So by categorizing this data, we can sort of create like like a number of like statistics to show that this is a problem and that it needs to be addressed.

Ken:

Okay. And then that data, once it's sort of once you've completed this particular kind of study, that gets shared broadly in order to affect policy or procedures.

Suheera:

Yeah. I mean, like, with this kind of work, it's like it's really hard to sort of, like get funding to help these people. So usually, like, if you have, like, compelling statistics and a compelling, like procedure, it could motivate, like, I basically, like, get you funding to be able to, like, create solutions for, you know, these people.

Ken:

Right, right. Very exciting. And that's exactly kind of why you're doing these two majors together, right? To think both in terms of understanding the science of medicine, but also thinking about how to improve health outcomes more generally for people in different populations. How do you picture a career in medicine? What does that look like for you?

Suheera:

So for me, like, once I sort of get past, like all the hurdles that come with a career and medicine, I would really like to, I guess, like, find a specific population to work with. Like, I was thinking, like globally,

like, I'm personally from Bangladesh, the country, and, like, I would like to maybe go back and, like, bring my expertise over there because there's women there who are also kind of like suffering from having, like, poor reproductive health care. So one of my big goals is to be able to go there and sort of provide them, like the healthcare that is lacking.

Ken:

So is that a place where you'd like to then go and settle and do medicine or are you thinking of traveling with I know people-

Suheera:

I would say, yeah, more like traveling because as much as I would like to also focus on Bangladesh, there's people here, there's certain counties here. Like I live in Massachusetts, which is in a city or town right next to Worcester Mass. And they have, like, I've worked with populations there, and they also are facing, like similar issues where like they're not getting access to reproductive healthcare. And their issues might not be the same as like what women in Bangladesh are facing, but it's still, like problems and like gaps in reproductive healthcare that are not being addressed.

Ken:

Yeah. Right. So do you see yourself more in a kind of a long term in a clinical setting or maybe in a public health setting or maybe in a research setting or some combination of those?

Suheera:

Um, that is a really good question. I would say I would like to end up like in a public health setting where, like, I have like the knowledge and, I would like to be start in a clinical setting because I need to like sort of gain experience, and that's like the best way to interact with new people one on one. But like once I gain enough experience and enough knowledge, then maybe to go in a broader public health setting where I'm like, maybe like creating policy or like advocating to create changes that I see are necessary.

Ken:

Very good. So beyond we've talked about a lot of stuff that you're involved in and you seem like you're probably very busy here.

Suheera:

A little bit. Yeah.

Ken:

So aside from all the stuff we've already touched on your lab work and that sort of stuff, is there any other kind of outstanding experience that you can remember within your major that has sort of stood out like a research project, or I don't know, or even just a course you took or a book you read. Is there anything you can think of that kind of stands out?

Suheera:

Yeah. So one experience that I really liked was like, I still do like I'm still part of it is UCHL. It's like UConn Health leaders. And what I really like about this experience is that, like we get to interact with the patients, and we basically kind of, like, screen them for social

determinants of health care. And in those areas, too, there is, like, a big demand. Like, a lot of people don't have transportation. A lot of people don't have, like, proper housing. They can't afford housing. Like, a lot of people are also like not getting screened enough for certain cancers or is like the procedural screen that you're supposed to get. A lot of people are not doing that because they don't have the means to be able to. So that was also, like a really big eye opening experience for me because it made me realize that, like, even if we do have this like doctor's office set up, it's like getting the patient to the doctor's office is just as important because nothing's going to happen if they can't get there because they have all these obligations.

Ken:

Right. Right. Now, is that a student driven organization?

Suheera:

Yeah, it's in conjunction with like UConn Health. So there are med students who are sort of, like, running the program, and then they recruit undergrads who are interested in like gaining this experience.

Ken:

Very interesting. Alright. Well, we covered a lot. Thank you so much for coming in, this is really fascinating.

Suheera:

Thank you for having me, I had a great time.

Ken:

Thanks for listening to Indie Major. If you'd like more information about individualized and interdisciplinary studies at the University of Connecticut, please visit our website at iisp.uconn.edu. That's iisp.uconn.edu. We'd also like to thank UConn Enrichment Programs and WHUS UConn Radio for their support of this show.