

# Mentorship in Medicine: Dr. Sarita Khemani Creates Resources for Aspiring Physicians

Tanvee Sinha

*“Showing up, showing up and taking on a leadership role, and showing up and building a legacy are very different things. Be that person who takes it to the next level,” said Dr. Sarita Khemani, a neurosurgery hospitalist at Stanford Medical School and Hospital (Palo Alto, CA) when discussing her primary advice to aspiring physicians.*

Khemani believes that while it’s important to focus on the end goal of becoming a physician, everyone has their unique path of getting there based on their respective backgrounds. Therefore, they should capitalize on their passions rather than solely focusing on the “desirable” or “resume-building” activities.

Khemani grew up in India and completed her medical education there. India’s system is structured to allow students to go directly to medical school after completing high school. She attended the Indira Gandhi Medical College in Shimla, a city in northern India.

After completing medical school, she moved to the United States to complete an Internal Medicine Residency at the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF). Although she initially trained as an internist, she eventually transitioned to working as a hospitalist resulting from the split between the two titles that occurred in the late 1970s. Internists used to have duties that now both an internist and hospitalist would respectively have, but due to the high volume of work, the two titles were coined and given separate responsibilities. As a hospitalist, she is able to spend more time in the hospital with her patients and check on them pre and post operation, in contrast to the mere 15-20 minutes she got to spend with her patients in the clinic as an internist. As an internist, she would meet her patients for a scheduled visit for a few minutes every few months rather than be able to check on their condition before and after surgeries as a hospitalist.

Khemani didn’t always want to be a doctor, however. She was originally a theater buff, participating in numerous plays and school functions, with dreams of being a Bollywood actress, but due to the programs offered at her school and her love for science from an early age, she pursued a more technical path in hopes of becoming a physician.

Now that she is a neurosurgery hospitalist at Stanford, Khemani cannot dream of being anything other than a doctor. She feels that the connection with patients is invaluable since medicine is one of the most personal and human professions that one can go into.

“You see patients in their most vulnerable state,” she says,



“and even if you see them for a few days, you form really good connections with them because of the level of trust that there is.”

Her love for establishing this substantial relationship with her patients, is the major reason she transitioned into her role as a hospitalist.

## The Daily Life of a Physician

Khemani’s normal workday starts at around 8 a.m. after the surgeons have already gone into surgery where she does rounds on admitted patients. In these multidisciplinary rounds, the entire care team is present, where they work together to make a projected care plan for patients. This includes the treatment plan, observations about the patient, and their discharge plan. The afternoon and evening times mainly consist of seeing patients coming out of the operating room. She once again performs these patient-focused rounds, with a little more emphasis on teaching medical students and residents.

Rounds and duties are finished by around 5-6 p.m. Khemani notes that while many physicians find the work and normal life balance difficult, she has found a healthy balance over the years. It can get exceptionally hard at times, but she balances by not taking on too many projects at one time. She has learned that “it is important to understand your boundaries and gauge productivity levels to avoid getting overwhelmed.”

However, being a physician still poses its unique challenges.

In attempts to be a good physician, it can be “all consuming” and take an emotional toll. Seeing very sick people and managing them every single day can weigh on an individual and lead to emotional drainage and internal tension. That is why Dr. Khemani really emphasizes the need for aspiring physicians to only get into the field if they are truly passionate about it.

“Looking at the goal and working towards it could honestly make what’s already a tough process, even tougher,” Khemani advises. “You need to enjoy the process and take it one day at a time.”

Reveling in the small successes and achievements keeps one motivated, something that is imperative through this especially long process of becoming a doctor. Going through undergraduate studies, medical school, residency, and specialization can all seem like an “endless life of schooling” but Khemani parallels it to working. She recommends that aspiring physicians should enjoy this work and the learning process, rather than solely seeing it constant schooling.

### **Beyond the Patients**

For those in the process of becoming a physician, she recommends that students focus on balancing academics and pursuing what they are truly passionate about. She also recommends setting boundaries to stay sane. Realizing one’s boundaries and how their skills can be used most effectively is imperative to avoid losing interest in pursuing this field. Taking a gap year or changing majors are some of the ways that students can most optimally utilize their skills, Khemani says.

Even as an established physician, she is not scared to ask for help when necessary. She genuinely emphasizes the importance of being receptive to others, as everyone has different strengths and backgrounds. In terms of how she is able to help aspiring physicians and provide help through her resources and skill sets, Khemani has two main outreach channels: 1) Stanford Clinical Summer Internship (CSI) and 2) Podcasts with medical students/residents published on Soundcloud.

The five-year-old [Stanford CSI](#) program is a two session, two week program during the month of July and early August, where high school students and undergraduate pre-medical students get to experience a “mini medical school.” In this internship, students visit the anatomy lab, shadow doctors at Stanford clinics, participate in simulation activities in the simulation lab with standardized patients, learn to give injections and take vitals, talk to professionals and students in different specialties of medicine, etc.

The main reason that Khemani and Dr. Eva Weinlander (Stanford Family Medicine Physician) co-started this program was to provide an opportunity for young aspiring physicians to work in a hospital. Many students would reach out to Khemani and Weinlander to shadow them or help with duties, but these two ladies wanted to make a greater impact on a larger group of students. This program is designed to help young students make a decision about what they want to pursue through exposure to different fields of medicine and basic medical practices. This

experience will aid them in making an informed decision about their future goals.

Stemming from this program, Khemani recently initiated a podcast series that consists of Stanford medical students/residents getting interviewed on their work and their journey up to this point to further help aspiring physicians. She realized that in Stanford CSI, participants thoroughly enjoyed talking to medical students and professionals, and were very interested in learning about their respective journeys. She once again wanted to utilize her resources and make a more significant impact on a broader group of students by recording podcasts with different professionals and posting it online for greater accessibility. Her podcasts are published about 2-3 times a month, with around 12 episodes as of October 2019 and can be found through the CSI Instagram page, and the Soundcloud link.

While not exactly starring in Bollywood movies, Khemani has been mindful to not only provide quality care to her patients but also to make significant efforts to help those unsure about entering the field.

“I hope that my program and podcast series provide fruitful experiences and helpful information for those truly passionate about those pursuing a career in medicine,” Khemani notes. “I know if students are open to advice and continue working hard, they are going to eventually be wonderful additions to the medical workforce.”