

Resident Spotlight

Dr. Omar Shafi

Family Medicine



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“If at first you don’t succeed...

Try, try again.” That’s how the saying goes. But sometimes, circumstances out of your control pile up against you, and just “trying again” seems fruitless, worthless, or a waste of energy.

Omar Shafi was experiencing these very thoughts in the mid-2010s as things in his life spiralled out of control. Everything that he had worked so hard to achieve, and the stepping stones he had placed along the way, began to crumble.

“We came to Canada from Pakistan in 2002 and settled in Surrey. Myself, my two younger brothers, and our parents,” Omar stated. “My dad went back to Pakistan because he had good employment there, so



my mother was left to take care of three boys.”

Getting by with limited English-skills was difficult at first, but Omar and his family would always have a plan whenever they went out.



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“I would have a game-plan scripted with my mom when we would go out to *Zellers*: ‘Alright Mom, I’ll say this line and you say this English line.’”

Money was tight for the family early-on. Omar recounts how he and his brothers would often just walk up to a *McDonald’s* to experience the aroma and flavours, without actually stepping inside, purchasing, or eating anything.

Omar completed his undergraduate degree at UBC, but was unable to get into medical school there.

“So I went to the Caribbean,” Omar stated. “I did two years there, and then two years in Louisiana. I loved in Louisiana and learned a lot being in a rural setting.”

The life-path that Omar and his family had been forging was about to come undone with little they could do to stand in the way of the unravelling.

He continued, “then when I graduated in 2013 I matched to residency in Louisiana and was going to be an Internal Medicine doctor!”

But Omar was unable to begin his residency in America because his name matched with another person’s who was flagged by Homeland Security as a threat. His efforts to convince authorities otherwise were not accepted, and he was forced to stay in B.C. and find another avenue to residency.

Soon after, however, his father suffered a stroke, and his mother fell into a coma and lost some of her physical mobility.

With debt accumulating from medical school loans, Omar began custodian work at a nearby pharmacy.

“It was so difficult to watch your peers progress past you — I felt alienated,” Omar stated. “I felt powerless, I checked all my boxes, crossed my t’s and dotted my i’s, and it didn’t matter”

Through his dedicated work ethic, Omar made strong connections in that pharmacy which led to a research position in Portland.

“I worked in Paediatric Oncology. This position humbled me. It gave me perspective to realize that we all ‘go through it’ at some point in our

own way, and this motivated me to keep trying,” Omar stated.

After a series of (costly) residency applications, Omar matched with UBC Family Medicine in the Surrey program for 2019, to be placed in same hospital that his parents once stayed. He’ll be graduating this summer.

“I’m so excited to be starting my family practice in Maple Ridge this July,” he stated. “I love being able to cover the full spectrum of health and be with a patient their whole life. I’m even looking to expand into community outreach initiatives!”

One of Omar’s big goals is to bring healthcare knowledge to Pakistan. “I just want to teach,” he stated. “Teach about proper disease management, diabetes, hypertension — things that are prevalent in South Asian communities. Mental health is extremely ostracized there, and it would do wonders to shed a light on its existence.”

Being in Family Medicine and participating in a continuity-of-care, along with Omar’s unfortunate difficulty to enter residency, has

given him a new appreciation and outlook on patient connections.

“I love Family Medicine: the collegiality among my peers and the feeling of getting to know your patients.” He continued, “if you and I sat together, I would find out that you also went through something difficult in your life. We all have. And when you spend the extra time to listen to your patients, it pays dividends in their outcomes.”

