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# PRIMARY TIMES

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# FROM THE TREADMILL TO KAZAKHSTAN: MY EXPERIENCE WITH THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION



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APNA's Recently Graduated Nurse of the Year Kaara Ray Calma shares her heart for primary health care, her role as a WHO Primary Health Care Young Leader and experience at the Global Conference on Primary Health Care.

I distinctly remember running on the treadmill one afternoon when I received a notification on my phone—an email addressed to me from the World Health Organization (WHO). I was surprised and curious how this email ended up in my inbox. Pausing the treadmill, I walked towards my desk to read the email.

*Dear Kaara Ray B. Calma,*

*Thank you for your recent application to the Primary Health Care Young Leaders Network. We have been inspired by the high calibre of candidates from across the world. The selection process was extremely competitive, with over 2000 applications for 21 places.*

*Your application demonstrated passion and commitment to improving primary health care. We are therefore pleased to inform you that you have been selected to join the Primary Health Care Young Leaders Network.*

My name is Kaara Ray B. Calma and I am a general practice registered nurse, a PhD candidate and teacher working at the University of Wollongong in New

South Wales. My interest in primary health care was fostered by my increasing awareness of the health issues experienced by people in our communities. Before I commenced as an undergraduate nursing student, I thought that people who are discharged from hospitals, or people who are not in hospital to begin with, are all healthy and well. But working in the hospital setting as a graduate nurse I quickly realised this is not the case. Many patients are discharged with ongoing issues, and needed an even larger multidisciplinary involvement. In the hospital setting, patients have 24/7 surveillance and care provided by the hardworking and passionate acute care team, especially nurses. But in the community patients go about their day in their own space, whilst potentially dealing with a number of comorbidities. These lessons ultimately brought me to primary health care, and moved me to undertake research in this space at the University of Wollongong.

And so reading the email from the WHO that I

was appointed to a network of professionals that aims to advocate and represent primary health care, made me feel a whole spectrum of emotions. Surprised. Curious. Disbelief. I had applied to join this network after my primary research supervisor Professor Elizabeth Halcomb suggested it back in September 2018. I knew that it was going to be a tough competition as WHO had called for young people from all over the globe who were involved in primary health care. Knowing that I had nothing to lose if I gave it a go, I worked on my application and sent it through. Little did I know that this was going to be the beginning of a wonderful and surreal journey.

Since October 2018 I have had the privilege to get in contact with WHO staff and consultants, as well as fellow Primary Health Care Young Leaders comprised of nurses, midwives, general practitioners, public health experts, researchers, academics and economists. Yet despite the diversity of our professions, geographic locations and cultural backgrounds, this network has built us a common ground, a platform for us to advocate for the one sector we care about the most—primary health care.

## GLOBAL CONFERENCE ON PRIMARY HEALTH CARE

My inclusion in the WHO Primary Health Care Young Leaders Network also granted me a ticket to attend the Global Conference on Primary Health Care in Astana, Kazakhstan, which was co-hosted by the Government of Kazakhstan, WHO and UNICEF. On 24 October 2018 the WHO Primary Health Care Young Leaders (including myself), as well as other young people from all over the world, came together to attend a Youth Pre-Conference event at Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan. This was kick-started by the President of the University, Mr Shigeo Katsu, who imparted to the young attendees a seven-letter acronym ABCDEHM which would help pave the way towards success. Mr Shigeo asked us to stay *Ambitious*, to *Believe* in ourselves and in the process, to *Commit* to whatever it is we are tasked to do, to *Do* and ensure we act on our visions and goals, to *Enjoy* the journey and stay *Humble* in the path of growth, and to *Maintain* respect for others. These words, I felt, truly energised each and every young person at this pre-conference event, and reminded us that we were there for a common and important purpose. The Director-General of the WHO, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, and Kazakhstan's Minister of Health, Yelzhan Birtanov, were also there to welcome us and inspired us about





investing in the younger generation for our future. The rest of the day was buzzing with new ideas and passionate insights from the young attendees.

The next two days became even more exciting, especially on the 25 October 2019 when the world literally came together to renew a commitment to strengthen primary health care systems in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals Universal Health Coverage and Health For All. The new Declaration of Astana reinvigorated the historical 1978 milestone when world leaders convened for the first time committing to primary health care through the Declaration of Alma-Ata. This declaration calls on all countries, governments, communities and healthcare systems to prioritise and build a sustainable primary health care, with the help of key stakeholders and empowerment of individuals to achieve desired health outcomes.

Every panel discussion and plenary session left me feeling inspired and motivated to work harder for primary health care. But a statement Dr Tedros made at one of the sessions was both inspiring and sobering, this was perhaps the moment when I truly realised how much we have taken primary health care for granted. “We have become too focused on treatment,” he said, “and this has been at the expense of promoting health and preventing disease.” As part of his concluding testimony, Dr Tedros went on to quote Pope Francis on his thoughts about health, “Health is a human right, not a privilege to those who can afford it.” Now if anyone were to ask me what primary health care is about, and why it is so important that countries have had to gather together to make a commitment of such magnitude, I’d describe it in these words.

Since then I have been so fortunate to remain in contact with my young leader colleagues within the network through monthly webinars, led by WHO one month and leaders the next. Through this alternating regime, I have had an opportunity to present a summary of my literature review findings on how the



## WE HAVE BECOME TOO FOCUSED ON TREATMENT, AND THIS HAS BEEN AT THE EXPENSE OF PROMOTING HEALTH AND PREVENTING DISEASE



undergraduate curriculum shapes nursing students’ perceptions of primary health care (a part of my PhD project) to my colleagues and WHO primary health care consultants. Although these webinars have been facilitated in the early hours (12am, 1am, or 2am), seeing WHO consultants and fellow young leaders dedicate their time regardless of time zone challenges has inspired me in many ways. I was also able to publish an article in the WHO Primary Health Care Young Leaders Network blog on ‘Why primary health care nursing is coming up short’. These opportunities have allowed me to not only increase my visibility as a researcher, I believe it has also enabled me to amplify the voice of primary health care nurses, especially from the country I call home—Australia.

### APNA NURSE AWARDS

In April 2019 I was privileged to receive APNA’s Recently Graduated Nurse of the Year, after being nominated by my research supervisor. I entered this field of work not knowing nor expecting to receive such an award, but to have my work recognised by Australia’s peak body for nurses in primary health care made me feel so proud. Proud because this meant I could be given a platform to emphasise that

the work does not happen overnight and certainly not on my own. I have and continue to work towards improving patient healthcare in the clinic, and the delivery of primary health care education to undergraduate nursing students through my research alongside a strong and dedicated team. God, my family, research supervisors, mentors, colleagues and friends are not only a part of this recognition, their unwavering support has been the biggest foundation of the goals that I have so far achieved, and so I received this award together with them.

I am in the midst of preparing for my next journey to attend the 72nd World Health Assembly in Geneva, Switzerland. Proud to be the Australian representative for primary health care nurses within the 21 WHO Primary Health Care Young Leaders network, driven by my ever-growing commitment for primary health care, and motivated by the thought of this once-in-a-lifetime experience, I am ready to absorb all the new knowledge I am about to encounter at the assembly and contribute in every way I can.

What happened to my session on the treadmill, you ask? To be perfectly honest, I did not go back to the treadmill the day I received that email. And although I went back to it a day later, I knew I had a longer and more purposeful marathon in front of me in the name of primary health care. These experiences (and what is to come) can perhaps only be surpassed by a realisation partly evoked by my student’s question as I shared my experiences in class: “What can you say about this whole experience?”

Among all the wonderful experiences and memories I’ve made in Astana, Kazakhstan, this question brought me back to the day I had written the very last sentence in my application for the WHO Primary Health Care Young Leaders Network. What made me want to apply? On top of all the self-doubt and self-assumptions that I couldn’t possibly make it, was it possible that deep down I believed I had a chance?

Quoting Beau Taplin, I answered:

“The best thing about bravery is even a little is enough.”

Want to read more of Kaara’s work?  
Check out her article on Young Leaders Blog  
([www.who.int](http://www.who.int))

