

SYLVIA CHRISTAKOS & ANURADHA PATEL

# Daughters and Their Mothers

Two esteemed faculty members celebrate their daughters' successes at NJMS and watch expectantly as they make their way into the wider world. **BY EVE JACOBS**

It can be hard to follow in the footsteps of a very successful parent. But for two recent New Jersey Medical School (NJMS) graduates, that's not the case at all. Priya Patel, MD'15, and Tina Christakos, MD'15, are well on their way to doing just that. Both are members of Alpha Omega Alpha National Medical Honor Society (AOA) and both have earned places in highly competitive residency programs. And both daughters of esteemed female faculty members at NJMS will soon take their places in traditionally male-dominated specialties.

Sylvia Christakos, PhD, professor of microbiology, biochemistry, and molecular biology, joined the faculty in 1980, became a full professor in 1990, and has attracted 35 years of uninterrupted NIH funding for her lab, among the top worldwide for Vitamin D research. When she was awarded a doctorate in endocrinology from the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1973, there were few women in the field. That was never a problem for her. In addition, her warmth and love of teaching have made her a favorite with students, who have showered her with 13 Golden Apple awards for excellence. Proud of her lineage, she tells of a grandmother who left the Greek island of Chios in the early 1900s and established the first Greek school in New York City; and an entrepreneurial mother who established floral businesses in Queens, worked 14 hours a day, read *The Wall Street Journal*, and invested in the stock market "at a time when most women stayed at home." She

gives students the same advice she gave her children: "Never become complacent. Maintain your ideals. Don't lose sight of why you chose your profession. Do it your way." She and husband Manny, a surgeon, have encouraged all three children to do just that, and two have chosen professions unrelated to medicine.

Only Athena (Tina), who loves music, plays several instruments, excelled in sports, and spent a semester in Greece, chose medicine after much soul-searching. "She's seen that my husband and I work all the time and she didn't know if she would want that," says her mother. However, three years after gradu-

ating from Stanford with a degree in biology, she chose medicine and then NJMS, and discovered that she loves the operating room. She recently began a residency at the University of Pennsylvania, where she will specialize in urology (including urological surgery), a field where only 8 percent of practitioners are women. But like her mother, grandmother, and great grandmother, she looks forward to breaking new ground.

The word "determined" can't begin to describe pediatric anesthesiologist Anuradha Patel, MD, as she pursued her career path across three continents. From the University of Jabalpur in India, where she earned



Sylvia Christakos (l) and Anuradha Patel (r)

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Priya Patel

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her medical degree, to England, where she completed training in anesthesiology, to Philadelphia, where she spent nine years retraining, taking U.S. licensing exams, and specializing in pediatric anesthesiology, she stayed focused on her goals. She joined the NJMS faculty 16 years ago.

Actually, her goals changed midstream. “I first wanted to be an ophthalmologist,” she says, “but I was in the operating room when there was a surgical emergency. I saw the anesthesiologist take charge, and I thought, ‘That’s the person I want to be—the one in charge in a crisis.’”

Despite playing that critical role in so many young lives, and having just a short amount of time to interact with her patients—before and right after surgery, and before they leave the hospital—Patel’s research addresses her concern about kids’ anxiety before surgery and frequent agitation after anesthesia. In 2004, the results of her clinical trial upended current practice, showing that when kids ages 4 to 12 are given Game Boys 30 minutes before surgery, their stress levels take a dive. “We found that distraction with interactive media was superior when compared with a commonly prescribed sedative, and also often better than a parent’s presence,” she comments.

It may have been the lively dinner-table conversations about medicine that inspired Priya to follow in the footsteps of her mother, surgeon-father, and brother, currently a resident in neurosurgery. “Although our careers are very demanding time-wise, we

love what we do. That must have showed,” says Patel.

Although Priya did not feel the call to medicine early on, “The thought was always there,” she says. In the summer before her junior year at Duke, she was awarded a Gates Foundation grant for a project she had designed on preventable blindness. She worked in rural villages in India, teaching young children how to prevent loss of sight caused by Vitamin A deficiency. “I think the nutritional education and supplements made a difference,” she says. (The local hospital carried on her efforts.) Her mother worried about Priya working alone in such remote locations, but for the college student it was a turning point. She had found her calling.

NJMS drew her with so many “strong positives—its location close to family, the

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Tina Christakos

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humanism center, the variety of patients and experiences, the Cross-Cultural and Integrative Medicine Organization, and some amazing faculty,” she says. Currently in a one-year internship in internal medicine at George Washington University, she will begin an ophthalmology residency at NYU next September. (According to the AAMC’s 2012 Physician Specialty Data Book, 20 percent of practicing ophthalmologists are women, a 5 percent jump in five years.)

“My parents have always been my role models,” she says. “They are so happy and satisfied with their jobs. I know my career will excite me in the same way.” ●

## Addicted to Food

*Continued from page 5*

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not possible with food addiction. “When you have a food addiction, you can’t lock the tiger in the cage and walk away. You have to walk the tiger three times a day,” he says.

“Most food-addicted patients wish for will power, but will power only works occasionally,” he says. The majority will need psychological, and sometimes pharmacological, support. Levounis often prescribes six months to one year of cognitive behavioral therapy for mild-to-moderate behavioral addiction, along with participation in a 12-step program, such as Overeaters Anonymous, and nutritional consults.

“We don’t usually prescribe drugs,” he explains, “unless there are co-occurring disorders, such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or obsessive-compulsive disorder.” A medication called naltrexone, which directly affects the reward circuitry of the brain and is used to treat alcohol dependence and opioid dependence, is currently under study.

“But a patient can’t let her or his guard down,” he says. “You have to keep your eye on the beast.”

When patients slide back, an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) drug—lisdexamfetamine—sometimes reduces the frequency of binge eating episodes. “We are only now starting to delve into the world of psychopharmacology for binge-eating disorder, but currently we don’t have any FDA-approved medications for food addiction or the other behavioral addictions.”

In the companion video to *The Behavioral Addictions*, the food-addicted woman who plays her part so convincingly is NJMS student Ragma Suresh. She is one of several students whose short stints as actors on the American Psychiatric Association website will likely impact their approach to treating patients with behavioral addictions for years to come. ●

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