

A Mission to Reform Health Care

Written by Carole Audet

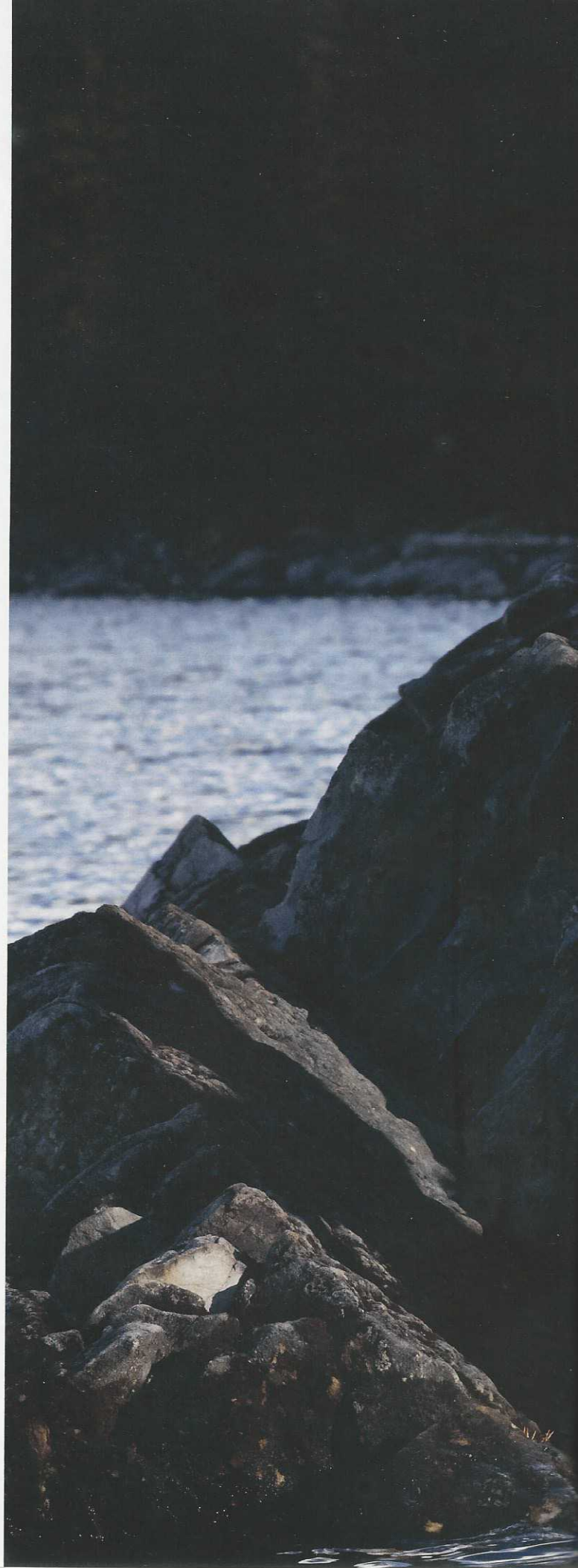
Photography by Michael Buckley

Muzammil Ahmad is a fourth-year medical student at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. His decision to become a doctor came after earning a business degree followed by working three years in the oil and gas industry. Despite the six-figure salary and the seven weeks of vacation each year, he was unfulfilled. He had a strong calling to make a difference in people's lives. But even the route to studying medicine and becoming an M.D. took some turns.

While Muzammil was in Bolivia on a backpacking trip, he had an epiphany. He came to realize that he was not happy while at work, only while on vacation. With his entire career ahead of him, he simply couldn't envision ever being content sitting at a desk, despite all the perks that came with the job. He wanted to be excited to go to work each day—something he was not feeling with his current position.

Upon returning from his vacation, he gave his notice to leave his job. But his path forward was still unclear. "At the time, I wasn't sure what I was going to be pursuing. I didn't think I was going to be doing medicine, to be completely honest. I just knew I needed some time to see what I want to do with my life and which direction I want to take. After quitting my job, I went backpacking for an extended period of time."

Muzammil travelled from New Zealand to Japan, visiting several countries along the way. He came to realize during this adventure that one of his favourite things was meeting people and having amazing conversations with them.



Mental health was, and continues to be, important to him. So, he decided to pursue a master's in psychology at the University of Glasgow. "It was a phenomenal experience and that opened my mind and a door to health care. Then, I debated between a Ph.D. in psychology to become a psychologist or pursuing medicine." He chose the latter.

"It's the best decision of my life—I have never been this happy in regard to what I'm studying. And since the beginning of third year, it's all been in clinical settings or hospitals and clinics, and I love meeting patients and talking to them. Hearing about their problem and coming up with a plan for them—it's been a phenomenal experience. I feel I found my passion and I'm excited to go to work every day."

He's hoping for a residency in Vancouver, with Victoria being his second choice. He's confident about his chances of getting into one of these sought-after residencies because he's been spending considerable time "building his application," and his master's in psychology will play a role in placing his application at the top of the pile.

"I want to pursue family medicine, and you see a lot of patients with mental health issues. Having that expertise will help me be a better doctor. In first and second year, I was doing research with a gastroenterologist regarding gut microbiome and how diet relates to digestive diseases. Now we're getting that published. There were a lot of people involved in that research, but I played a big role, so that also helps make my application stronger."

In addition to this, Muzammil launched a plant-based nutrition club at the medical school, bringing in doctors and dietitians to speak about the "importance of nutrition and how eating plant-based is beneficial to help prevent disease." He also ran a psychiatry club, obtained certifications in nutrition—one from Cornell University upon receiving a scholarship, the other from Astrid Ashworth University.

For now, Muzammil shares his knowledge around nutrition and mental health via his Instagram account, where he has more than 35,000 followers, and his Plant Prescription podcast. Everything adds up for a strong residency application.

It's no secret that there's a near-complete absence of nutritional information in the medical field. Muzammil posits there are multiple reasons for this, one being the lack of instructors with the knowledge or passion for this area of medicine. Very few take the time to gain expertise in the science of nutrition and then incorporate this information into their lectures. "They just don't find nutrition that interesting because it gives control to the patient. And there's an unfortunate belief that patients are not going to make the necessary changes. But we can't make that assumption about all patients because there are many who just don't have the knowledge to make the changes."

There's also a systemic issue within the medical field—a problem with the curriculum. Muzammil has discovered that the focus is on treating a condition quickly, whether pharmaceutically or surgically, and this is what the medical system is built on. Any solutions beyond this are considered less important, regardless of the science that backs up options like lifestyle changes to improve one's health.

Muzammil points out that many doctors themselves could use to incorporate a lifestyle change for better health. He equates it to smoking—doctors who smoked themselves were loath to advise their patients not to smoke. "There's cognitive dissonance because you have to first accept that what you're doing yourself is wrong before you can tell someone else to stop doing it."

Part of his mission moving forward is to start planting seeds that nutrition needs to be incorporated into medical school curriculums. This would be easy to do when studying type two diabetes, heart disease, atherosclerosis, and cardiovascular disease because their underlying cause is often poor dietary habits. "I feel it needs to be integrated within the curriculum, and that is something I'm very passionate about. Once I'm a doctor and I can be more involved in the medical school curriculum, then I want to bring that awareness that this needs to be incorporated throughout, rather than a separate lecture or separate course."

In fact, despite not yet having acquired his M.D. and knowing that many of those in power are not open to this conversation from a medical student, that hasn't stopped Muzammil from putting his ideas forward when he can. Once he's fully credentialed, he will be moving forward with his plan.

"Wherever I end up establishing myself, I want to get involved in that medical school. I want to be on the



committee so I can bring awareness to this and show them that prevention is the key to everything. We talk about health care, but really what we're dealing with is sick care. And we talk about empathy and compassion, but how can we truly be empathetic and compassionate if we're not telling people how to prevent getting sick in the first place?"

While he recognizes that not every health issue can be prevented, chronic lifestyle diseases can be reversed with dietary changes. Eventually, he wants to spread this knowledge on a national level and work toward having it incorporated in all medical schools throughout Canada. While he's at it, he wants more doctors to be trained in motivational interviewing, which involves taking the time to explain health issues and how to incorporate changes. This gives patients the power to improve their health, and doctors don't reach for the prescription pad as the first solution.

"If we could focus more on training doctors with the right knowledge in nutrition and then also building the skillset of motivational interviewing to help their patients incorporate lifestyle changes, that would be powerful, and would make for even better doctors."

When not studying or working to reform health care,

Muzammil loves sharing his healthy and flavourful plant-based recipes with his followers on Instagram and on his website. Despite his busy schedule, he makes a point of going to the gym four to seven times per week. "I keep myself active as much as possible, and a lot of people in med school, unfortunately, don't have that balance of physical activity and eating healthy. I want to be a good example to my patients. If I'm going to give them advice, I want to make sure I'm following it myself, so they can see the results."

Having lost several family members has played a role in Muzammil's determination to follow a healthy lifestyle with a balance of good plant-based nutrition, exercise and taking part in activities he enjoys—such as photography and hiking.

Muzammil's vegan journey began for health reasons. But over the past three years, he's looked at veganism more holistically, including the environmental and ethical factors. "I care about sustainability and what I can do for the planet. I try not to shop too much, try to avoid fast fashion as much as possible, try to make conscious decisions. When I looked into the food factor, I realized that food plays a big role in sustainability. Eventually, I came across the ethical piece."


Similarly, his journey with working out began with his desire to lose weight, but that too has changed over the years. "The motivation initially came specifically from a weight loss point of view. I wasn't thinking about being healthy. But my mindset has changed quite a bit. I promote fitness more for health and longevity because I think that is most important. I want people to feel good, have energy and live long. Fitness and nutrition play a huge role. Sure, weight loss can come as a secondary thing, but I'd rather people focus on disease prevention and longevity, and then weight loss comes naturally."

Muzammil's plans for his medical practice is to open a multidisciplinary centre that includes professionals with a variety of expertise, for example, dietitians, nutrition coaches, kinesiologists, personal trainers, as well as like-minded doctors. "We can talk about a patient's health from different angles instead of taking a linear or singular approach to medicine. I want to talk about nutrition and fitness quite a bit with my patients, as I believe that should be the foundation of medicine."

He also feels the starting point in medicine needs to be empathy and compassion. "But it shouldn't stop there. We need to hold those values dearly and incorporate them outside of the medical field as well."

"We live on this planet Earth, and we often forget to show it any compassion or empathy. The choices we make have a direct impact on what's going to happen in the future. If we're not taking care of planetary health, that's going to impact human health—we're already seeing that. We should be compassionate toward the planet and other beings." ●

Muzammil Ahmad, a Plant-Based vegan originally from Calgary and currently residing in Edmonton, is a fourth-year medical student at the University of Alberta, has certification in nutrition, and a Master's in Psychology.

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