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ALL IN THE *Head*

# DR. WHO

## MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

### DR. WAQAR SALEEM

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**D**r. Waqar Saleem has had a heart for helping those in need since he was young. It was one of strongest reasons he chose medicine, years ago. Now, his love for serving others in need can be seen in his vast resume of volunteer and non-profit work.

Growing up in a small town in Pakistan called Kharian Cantt, Dr. Saleem always enjoyed school, and found he excelled most in math and science. Soon, he learned that the drive to help others was in his blood. His three older sisters were role models for him, and two of them were in medical school, eventually going on to become OB-GYNs in Pakistan. Once he heard their stories about a career that combined science with helping people, he followed in their medical footsteps. His parents were ideal role models and were highly supportive of the decision. After high school and college, he moved to Lahore, where for six years he attended post-graduate training, then medical school, at King Edwards Medical College. Just arriving from a small city with less than 100,000 people to Lahore with a population of over 11 million was an eye-opening surprise.

"It was a huge culture shock. It's like coming from a rural area in America to Chicago or New York" he said. "There were lots of people, lots of traffic, and it was just really hard to navigate. I also lived in the dorms, and that was my first dorm experience, which was interesting."

After settling in and completing his medical school, he had another six months of post-graduate training in Pakistan. However, he knew that his options for his next steps in primary care were limited.

"You are really limited to the countries with excellent post graduate training with English as a primary language. There was America,

the UK and some other countries in Europe. But really post-graduate training in the US is wonderful," he said.

Dr. Saleem applied to residency programs across the country without knowing much about the new cities he'd be stepping into, just like so many other foreign medical graduates. After interviewing at the University of Louisville, he found it to be a great fit and was enthused to join the program in 1997. Even the small town to big city experience had not prepared Dr. Saleem for the vast differences he met here in the US.

"The first time I was in the US after interviews, that was my first work experience. Coming from another country and being another country's citizen, it's a very different culture that you're exposed to. It's the same patients, but navigating the work environment and things like the buildings and computer systems, that's a huge change."

Dr. Saleem spent three years in residency at the University of Louisville in the Department of Family and Geriatric Medicine. In 2000, he began practicing in the medically underserved area of the West End where he enjoyed his work so much, he remained there for the next seven years. Even now, he still works in this area from time to time at the Family Community Clinic, treating patients without insurance.

After that, he worked for many different hospital systems, going through all the major mergers and acquisitions over the last decade. He is now employed by UofL Health and is with UofL Physicians - Primary Care in their Outer Loop office. While he is still in the office a few days per week, Dr. Saleem's role in the community has shifted from hospital rounds and office visits to something much different, all because of the recommendations of some colleagues.

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"The Department of Family and Geriatric Medicine has the only geriatric fellowship program in the state of Kentucky, so we always have a huge emphasis on geriatric medicine," he said. "I had some great attendings and role models. One of them, Dr. Patrick Murphy, that I still stay in touch with told me I might want to try out long-term care work. Then another lifelong friend Dr. Muhammad Babar told me the same thing."

So he did exactly that. Starting at just one facility in 2008 as an attending quickly grew into a much larger position. Within a short period of time, Dr. Saleem became the Medical Director/Co Medical Director at seven long-term care facilities in the area.

"My focus is primarily on the patient and their health condition, dealing with their chronic medical problems and how the facility's policies can affect those and make a better change for those patients," he said.

In addition to his administrative duties at the facilities, infection control obviously took over a major part of his day-to-day when COVID-19 began to hit long-term care facilities.

"We always paid attention to infection control, especially during every flu season. But the issue we had when the pandemic started was that we had no idea how to full confront that," he said. "We had to lead with what we knew."

Since the beginning of COVID-19, he has been a part of a task force with The Society for Post-Acute and Long Term Care Medicine that aims to help long-term care physicians determine what steps to take to protect their patients and staff during this time. In addition, he is also a part of the state task force under Secretary Eric Friedlander for the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services.

"We are responsible for some policy making," he said. "There has been a lot of education and a steep learning curve as we shut down facilities to visitors, and as we learned how to coordinate care for our patients. That was the most important thing—to prevent the outbreak, and once the outbreak happened, how to control it," he said, also noting that they have placed a strong emphasis on transparent communication with patients' family members.

In addition to his role as a Certified Medical Director and an in-office primary care physician, he is also Clinical Faculty at the University of Louisville and Community Faculty at the University of Kentucky, teaching both undergraduate pre-med students as well as resident physicians.

When he's not working, you can likely find Dr. Saleem still using his time to help his community. Currently the Vice President of both Doctors for Healthy Communities and Muslim Americans for Compassion, Dr. Saleem uses his time to give back to those that need it the most.

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"I have keen interest in improving public health. Also, I am Muslim by faith, so I am especially interested in building interfaith relationships."

Doctors for Healthy Communities has long had a goal of helping to improve the overall public health of Louisville, with an emphasis on children. The organization often works with Jefferson County Public Schools to provide things like school supplies, hygiene bags, clothing pantries, physicals and much more. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, they have donated over 20,000 K-95 masks to around thirty counties located mostly in rural parts of Kentucky.

The Muslim Americans for Compassion group aims to improve the understanding between different faiths. In what Dr. Saleem describes as "interfaith productivity" the organization engages the community through outreach based on interfaith principles and often works alongside other organizations such as Interfaith Paths to Peace. Their signature event "Annual Iftar Dinner; breaking of the fast in Ramadan" is always well attended with over 500 participants and is in its tenth year.

Dr. Saleem also serves as Secretary of Kentucky Board of Medical Licensure, as a member of the Muslim Jewish Advocacy Council and sub committees at AMDA - The Society for Post-Acute and Long Term Care Medicine, and with the Kentucky Academy of Family Physicians and American Board of Family Practice. Dr. Saleem has also served many years on behalf of the Greater Louisville Medical Society as a Delegate to the Kentucky Medical Association, saying that he really enjoys the advocacy part of organized medicine.

"The KMA is advocacy at the state level, and that allows us to address different issues that deal with public health and regulatory medicine. Those regulations impact the way that we practice," he

said. "And GLMS is also very near and dear to my heart. Yes, they help us get credentialed at the hospital, but one of the biggest advantages is having one place where we can communicate with other physicians about any issue we may be facing."

Dr. Saleem doesn't have too much spare time with a resume like this. But he always makes sure to take time to be with Hana, his wife of 24 years, who graduated from the same medical school and trained in Pakistan as an ophthalmologist. In the US, she has taken on the role of running the home front. She is an avid reader and is known for her gardening. They are blessed with amazing children, Nashwa and Jawad. Both are now both in college, so with Hana he is finding more time for their favorite things like walking outdoors, cooking and travelling now that they are empty-nesters.

Even after all of the changes in his personal life and professional career, he still comes back to what drew him to medicine while watching his sisters all those years ago: direct patient care and relationships. He wants to not only know about his patients' medical conditions, but also who they are as a person.

"It's not just about their 15-minute appointment slot and their medical problems. I want to know them as a whole person, their life story, what is going on with them currently, and hopefully I gain their trust. It is a two-way relationship. You learn from the patient's history to help diagnose, but you also learn about strength and weaknesses in yourself, and that's good for you as a clinician and lifelong learner." ❦

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