

# Letter to a Young Scientist

## *From Medicine to Politics*

By ANITA P. SOMANI, MD<sup>1</sup>

**Dr. Anita Somani** is a practicing Obstetrician/Gynecologist and a second-term state representative for Ohio House District 8. Originally from India, Dr. Somani moved to the United States as a baby and attended elementary and secondary school in Wisconsin, Florida, and India. After college in Ohio, she completed her MD degree from the Medical College of Ohio in 1988 and then a residency in OB/GYN at Mt. Carmel in Columbus. She received her board certification in 1994, and now practices at Ohio Health in Columbus. On January 3, 2023, she was first sworn in as a state representative for the Ohio House District 11. Following redistricting and reelection, she now represents the people of Dublin and Worthington in Ohio House District 8.

ONCE UPON A TIME, A YOUNG COUPLE immigrated from India to the United States; along with their baby they began a new life together. My Dad received his medical degree in India but wanted to further his education with a PhD, which was the impetus for moving to the United States. My Mom had to become fluent in a second language, set up a home, and raise children in a foreign country where she knew no one.

### From India to Wisconsin

Our journey began in Wisconsin—which is about as different from India as you can imagine. Thankfully, American colleagues and neighbors welcomed us and over time we assimilated. When I was 3 years old my parents had my twin siblings, and as the oldest child I started taking it upon myself to teach them.

Because I enjoyed teaching my younger siblings, I dreamed of becoming a teacher when I grew up. However, that eventually evolved as I started reading and learning more about what my Dad did. He was in academic medicine and did research in cardiology to study new drugs in clinical trials with patients. I realized at a young age that as a doctor you could teach, do research, and take care of patients. It seemed to combine so many different pathways into one career.

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### Life is Never a Straight Path

But life never follows a straight path. I was independent at a young age and a little bit of a rebel. I skipped third grade, and out of boredom started to act up in school. For those of you who have felt that way, it may be that you just need more challenges, rather than you are a problem child. Fast forward to middle school—my parents thought that it would be best for me to go to boarding school in India. This is very common in India, so they did not think it was a big deal to send me halfway around the world to go to boarding school in the same town that they grew up. I spent 3 years there and went from hating it to not wanting to come back. I made good friends and I got to know my “Indian family,” including many cousins my age, whom I am still close to. By the end of those 3 years, my parents had moved to Florida, and I came back to high school in Florida. Friends in high school all thought I was the most likely to become a doctor. I loved my science classes and talked incessantly about what it would be like if I was a doctor. What I did not know then is that the path to being a doctor involves many years of school. In India, people only do 2 years of college before going to medical school, but here it is 4 years of college followed by 4 years of medical school.

### Gap Year, College, and Medical School

After high school I got a scholarship to the University of Miami, but my parents left for Ohio with my siblings. I started thinking about whether I should go to India again and try to go to medical school there. At 18, I went back to do a gap year and potentially go to medical school in India. It was a great year of traveling, studying, and realizing I was not quite ready to be a doctor. I ultimately transferred back to college in Ohio and decided to major in psychology. If you want to be a doctor, you do not have to major in biology or chemistry.

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In fact, you can major in anything as long as you take the basic courses for the MCATs. I would highly recommend majoring in something you can see doing as an alternative to medicine, as it is very competitive to get into medical school. While in college I met my future husband who suffered through those years with me.

College and then medical school were a blur of studying, taking exams, and enjoying the craziness of what was the '80s.

I went to medical school to become a psychiatrist and ended up specializing in Obstetrics and Gynecology (OB/GYN). I got married during medical school and had my first child during my second year of residency. It was the early '90s and there was no maternity leave for residents. Fortunately, having a supportive husband and parents helped make those years bearable. I had my second child during my first year of practice, which was better as far as time commitments.

### **A Physician and Legislator**

I eventually started my own practice, which involved learning the business of medicine. In 2009, robotic technology was introduced into gynecologic surgery. We were early adopters, and the da Vinci robot has been a game changer for our patients. We are still doing the actual surgery, but the camera gives us a 3D view and the instruments have the ability to articulate and move like our hands. It has resulted in less blood loss, less pain, and shorter recovery time. The newest robots are now used in many different specialties.

I have always been a healthcare advocate, but it was not until reproductive rights were on the ballot and

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coming back to the states that I was asked to run for public office. Unlike becoming a doctor, becoming a politician does not require any specific set of credentials or degree, so it has been a very different process for me and quite the learning experience.

### **Evidence-based Decision Making**

As an OB/GYN, I was always committed to providing comprehensive reproductive healthcare, guided by the latest medical research and best practices. My experiences in medicine have reinforced my belief that public health policies should be grounded in scientific evidence to ensure the best outcomes for everyone. My career in medicine has shown me the critical importance of making decisions informed

by science. This commitment is what led me to pursue a role in

public service, where I work to ensure that policies are based on evidence and facts. One of the challenges we face in public health today is the erosion of trust in vaccines, which are fundamental to disease prevention. During the COVID pandemic there was a significant decline in vaccine confidence, which has unfortunately led to the reemergence of diseases that had been under control for decades. This highlights the crucial role that people with a STEM background can play in advocating for evidence-based public health strategies and educating communities about the importance of vaccines and other medical advancements.

### **Teamwork and Civic Engagement**

Life has now come full circle with my daughter becoming an OB/GYN and my son becoming an engineer. As immigrants in the '60s, America was the country that was seen worldwide as a place that was inclusive, progressive, and diverse. As Hamilton said, "Immigrants, we get the job done." As a doctor and scientist, I know that people who work together can accomplish much more than those who isolate themselves. Taking care of patients often involves a team of caregivers. Taking care of citizens also involves a team of people. Active civic engagement is essential for ensuring that our communities benefit from informed, evidence-based decisions. As scientists, we have a unique responsibility to apply our expertise to contribute positively to society. I am honored in my dual roles to be a doctor who is able to take care of patients and a politician who is able to take care of citizens.

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