

Alberta researcher takes \$250,000 Dr. Rogers Prize

VANCOUVER SUN

The 42-year-old founding director of Canada's first academic pediatric integrative medicine program is the recipient of the 2013 Dr. Rogers Prize for Excellence in complementary and

alternative medicine.

Dr. Sunita Vohra, of the University of Alberta, was named as the winner of the \$250,000 award at a gala dinner Thursday at the Fairmont Waterfront Hotel.

The Dr. Rogers Prize is the

largest cash prize of its kind in North America.

"It is overwhelming," Vohra said about being chosen as this year's recipient. "It is a huge honour. I have not had enough time to digest it. It's incredible and humbling at the same time."

The clinician scientist said in an interview before Thursday's announcement that she didn't have specific plans for the money other than she would use it to help get the kind of research she does out of books and into policy that makes changes in the world.

Complementary and alternative medicine is defined by the Canadian Interdisciplinary Network for Complementary and Alternative Medicine as a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices and products that are not considered part of conventional medicine.

Vohra said she wanted to be a physician since she was a child. Although her grandfather was a doctor and she grew up with the stories he would tell about helping other people, there wasn't one single event or incident that convinced her to pursue medicine as a career.

"When I was young, I needed glasses. The fact that someone could help me and make me feel better, do better, see better, simple thing — that intrigued me," she said.

"The idea that this seemed to be a meaningful way to spend one's time to help other people feel better."

Near the beginning of her career, after she had decided on pediatrics, Vohra faced a major turning point. It came when she was doing her specialty training in pharmacology at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto as well as an advanced research degree in clinical epidemiology at McMaster University in Hamilton.

Not only did she learn how little traditional medicine knew about the therapies being used to treat children, she found herself facing more and more questions from patients she couldn't answer.

"I had had the benefit of some of the best institutions in our country to train me and I'm deeply grateful to them," she said.

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"Despite that, after 13 years of university, I couldn't answer patients' questions. They wanted to know things like 'Can I take that product?' 'Can I use that practice?' 'Can I mix that with that?' 'Is it safe?'"

What it did was make her stop and think. What could she do to give her patients better answers?

She decided she could best help patients by becoming a research scientist and use a patient-centred, evidence-based approach to explore alternative and complementary therapies.

"We try to answer the questions patients and family ask," she said. "Those most commonly fall in two general categories: 'Does it work?' and 'Is it safe?'"

She is the founding director of Complementary and Alternative Research and Education or CARE at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. She is evaluating the effectiveness of pediatric integrative medicine alongside traditional care at Stollery Children's Hospital in Edmonton.

Vohra says that alternative and complementary therapies are extremely popular in Canada.

"The data suggests 70 per cent of Canadians use complementary



Dr. Sunita Vohra says she will use her award money to change her research into policy.

medicine. The work we have done suggests that it is commonly used in children — roughly half of all the children in Canada," she said.

Among children facing serious, chronic, recurring or life-threatening illnesses such as cystic fibrosis, attention deficit disorder, autism, asthma and cancer, as many as 100 per cent of youngsters are being treated with alternative and complementary therapies.

In the medical community, she said, there has been a dramatic shift toward supporting alternative and complementary therapies in the past 15 years.

"We now have wonderful networks of institutions that have many dozens of hospitals and medical centres that are a part of them and appreciate that research and education in integrative medicine is important to patients and families," she said.

"I think there has been a big change. I think there is more change to come. I don't think we have reached the end of what this is going to look like. I think we're just at the beginning."

She hopes that the future brings less of an "us and them" division between traditional and alternative approaches to medicine.

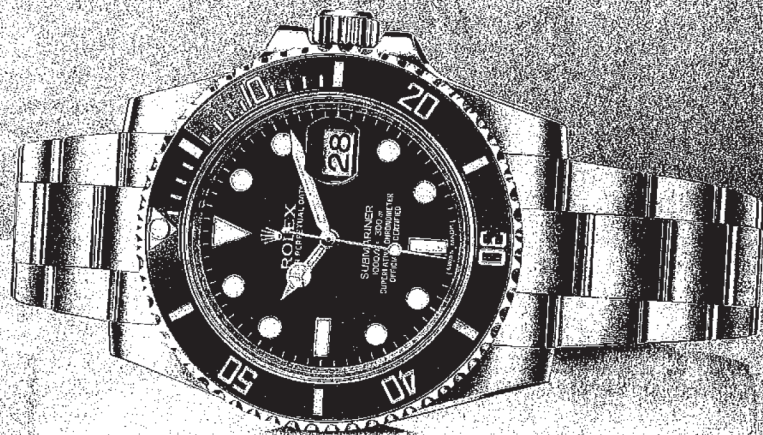
"I think that therapies are along a continuum," she said.

"I think that patients make choices around therapies that interest them and the things they're willing to take. I think that conversation with their health care provider can be inclusive around all their health care providers."

Founded in 2007, the Dr. Rogers Prize for Excellence in Complementary and Alternative Medicine highlights the contributions of complementary and alternative medicine to health care.

It is named after the late Dr. Roger Hayward Rogers who offered non-traditional therapies to cancer patients. The award is funded in Vancouver by the Lotte and John Hecht Memorial Foundation. It is awarded every two years.

The 2011 winner was Dr. Marja Verhoef. She holds the country's only research chair in complementary medicine at the University of Calgary.



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