



Dr. Deepak Palakshappa

In this podcast, **Dr. Deepak Palakshappa**, a public health researcher at **Wake Forest University School of Medicine**, discusses his passion for connecting with people and gives advice on how to navigate the ups and downs of a career in STEM.

Break the podcast down:

00:58: Hello Deepak, welcome to the Futurum Careers podcast. How are you today?

I'm doing well, thanks for asking, and thanks for having me.

Yeah, you're welcome, thanks for being here. So, I normally start with three quick-fire questions just to get to know you a little bit better. So, the first question is: what's your favorite thing to do on the weekend?

Well, I have two younger kids so my favorite thing generally revolves around them. So, it's usually kids' soccer or football games, things like that. But I also enjoy playing golf in the rare chance that I get some freedom.

So, the next question is: if you're feeling stressed out or overwhelmed, how do you keep yourself calm?

I think certainly playing golf is my big stress relief. Also, I enjoy reading – both fiction and non-fiction books. I try to keep it interesting and mix it up.

And the last question is: if you could be any animal, what animal would you be and why?

I think I would pick elephant, because the level of commitment they have to each other and their ability to remember their exact route each year in their migration across a certain part of Africa, to me, that was sort of inspiring. And, yeah, we have a lot of elephant stuff around the house because the kids love elephants.

02:23: Cool, so you're a public health researcher with a focus on food insecurity and social determinants of health. So, I thought we could start by you giving us and our listeners a little overview of what those terms mean and what your current research involves.

Yeah, so, I'll start with public health research, and I think that's generally thinking about studying different ways that we can improve overall health for a group or a population. So, food insecurity. Food insecurity is defined by the US Department of Agriculture as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active and healthy life. So, essentially being worried about having enough food for you and your family. And so, a lot of my research focuses around: how do we better improve people's and families' access to healthy foods? And I'm also a physician, so I think about it particularly in the healthcare context because traditionally healthcare said, "Well, food insecurity is not really something we deal with. That's more of a public health or a policy/government issue." But now I think there's growing recognition that it's hard to improve people's health, like their diabetes, or their blood pressure, if we don't first take care of people's access to food.

03:52: Yeah, so it's bringing those two things together. So, how has your research journey led you to this point? And, maybe thinking about the earlier stages of your career path as well, what experiences from school up to now have been particularly influential?

Yeah, so in school and in university I wasn't exactly sure where my career would go. Actually, after I finished university, I took a year off and worked for a non-profit teaching seventh and ninth grade math in a lower-income neighborhood. And that's really what sparked me on this journey. You know, working with the kids there, seeing the impact of poverty on both their education as well as their health made me realize, well, really the best way for me to try to better that is to try to go through the healthcare and public health research route. What got me particularly interested in food insecurity specifically is, during my medical training, I kept noticing that more and more patients would tell me that they weren't able to afford their medicines because they were struggling to pay for the food in their home. And, as a physician, it's pretty challenging because you think, "Hey, your diabetes isn't doing well. Let me give you this medicine, that should help things." But then you realize there are all these other social drivers that impact people's health and their ability to pay for healthcare that far exceeds whatever I could do in that 15-minute or 30-minute clinic visit. And that led me to thinking about how research could be used as a tool to better improve my patients' access to food.

So, it's that firsthand experience of being a physician and working with patients and realizing the scope of their problems and how interconnected it all is. Not just their health issues, but the rest of their life and their social situation as well.

Yeah, exactly.

05:52: In [your Futurum careers] brochure you also spoke about volunteering or working at a community engagement group, and I think you said you delivered meals for older people and worked out in Africa for a little bit. So, could you just chat about that for a bit?

Yeah, so again, during my university or college years, I always had this internal motivation to try to improve the lives of people living in low-income neighborhoods or living in poverty. And, [so I] got involved in what we call our 'service-learning program' or that community engagement program that you mentioned. And two ways in particular that I spent a lot of my time volunteering was, we had what's called a Meals on Wheels program where volunteers would go around and deliver meals to generally older adults that, for whatever reason, aren't able to leave their homes, aren't able to afford food. And so, I did that for a number of years and went on the same route, got to know the people I →

was delivering food to, got to hear their stories, and that really inspired me into thinking about where I wanted to take my life and what I wanted to do as a career to better people's lives. It also led me to work in Africa for a month during college, helping build a school in that area. And again, similarly, being there for a month, meeting the people in the village and hearing their stories really reiterated my passion around trying to improve people's lives.

I'm picking up a little theme here of your inspiration coming from real human interactions with other people, be that doctors, be that patients, be that old people who you're delivering meals to.

Yeah, I think that that's 100% right that for me, I feel like I need to see, or need to hear the stories to keep me invigorated and keep me invested, and to make me realize what the end goal of all of this is.

07:57: So, you were volunteering during university and college times, which are notoriously busy times, and you've got loads going on. So, how did you find the time, or what drove you to find the time and the motivation to volunteer, to carve that time out?

Yeah, I mean, I think meeting mentors and friends and colleagues that were also doing it. And so, it stopped being sort of like, "Oh, this is just one more thing to do," and actually just became a fun, enjoyable thing to do. I mentioned the Meals on Wheels program that I did; I actually did that with one of my closest friends from university - we're still close friends - and we would go every week, and we just knew that that's what we did on a Thursday. But, you know, when it becomes part of your friends, and part of your group, it doesn't seem like work, or it doesn't seem like a task. It just seems like something fun that we would enjoy doing.

Yeah, I guess at that point it becomes more of a hobby, something you do to hang out, to enjoy it. I think that's important. Sometimes it's easy to view volunteering and work experience and that kind of thing as a drag, or a chore, or something you've got to do to tick a box. But actually, a lot of these experiences can be life changing and can really set you up on your path, wherever it is that it's going to take you. Absolutely.

09:19: So, would you say that there are any traits or characteristics that you have that have helped you succeed in your research career?

Yeah, I mean, I think certainly my passion around connecting with people. The other thing is, I can get really interested in topics and sort of get lost in that. And, I think now people are starting to use that term 'flow' where you reach a state where it doesn't feel like work, it doesn't feel like a lot of effort, it just kind of feels like an enjoyable moment. And I can do that, whether it's reading about a particular topic or... I really enjoy looking at data, and I can lose myself in the data that comes with the research and the data that we collect and the data that others have collected.

Not many people can say that they get loads of enjoyment out of data and statistics. But for you, it seems like you get quite a lot of enjoyment out of that.

I do! It's interesting. Again, I pull up a data set and just sit there for hours and just lose myself in looking at it and seeing what's going on and seeing what the story is that the data tell.

10:43: Yeah, I think that's a rare skill, a rare talent. So, this has all been quite positive so far, but has there been any moments in your career, or any aspects of your career, up to this point that you have found particularly challenging, and then how have you overcome them?

I didn't wake up one day and realize, "Oh this is the route I wanted to take," you know. It was a process. And I think most people's life is not a straight line, it's a very crooked line. And you're hopefully trying to get to somewhere along that crooked line. But, when you're in the moment,

I think that can be very challenging and feeling like, "What am I doing? Is this the right thing for me? How do I figure out what it is that I really want to do for the next seventy years of my life?" And so, I think not being afraid to try different things. To see what fits and what doesn't. You'll be surprised what it is that inspires you and keeps you motivated each day. And the two things that have helped me through those situations is, one, just enjoying the process, and the other big thing (and I would say this for anybody in any stage of their life) is finding the right mentors. And not just one, but having a few different mentors that can help support you through these things, that can talk about, "Hey, this isn't the end of the world, you know, things don't always go smoothly," and help you realize that again, life isn't a straight line. That it is a crooked line, or a curved line, however life takes you. At each stage and along the way, I had some mentors that were there for me during particular stages in my training and others that have continued to be mentors throughout my life and have given me some perspective about the challenges, but also when it's okay just to celebrate, to celebrate those wins.

12:49: So, if we end on any final advice that you would give to young people who are thinking about what they're going to do next after high school level, and if they're thinking about a career in STEM, in science. What advice would you have?

I think the two biggest pieces of advice that I would have are: one, don't be afraid to reach out to people that have gone through this. It could be as simple as getting some advice and just hearing about their experiences. I think definitely one of the best things I have done through the different stages of my career is just to reach out to different people and say, "Hey, tell me about your life. Tell me what happened. How did you get to where you got?" You'll be surprised at the stories you'll hear, both the ups and the downs. The other big piece of advice I would give is, again, to not be afraid to try it. You know, if there is some program that you're like, "Hey, that sounds interesting. I'm going to give that a shot," it doesn't mean that you have to commit to it your entire life. It doesn't mean that you have to commit to it for a year. But, give it a shot. You know, if I hadn't done the Meals on Wheels program and hadn't just said, "Oh, I'm going to give this a shot," I'm not sure I necessarily would have gone the direction I did in my career. So, yeah, I would say, for younger people out there, just to not be afraid to try it and see, and be okay with saying, "Alright, this wasn't the right fit, and I'm okay with recognizing that and pulling back."

14:30: Well, thank you so much Deepak for joining me on the Futurum Careers podcast. It's been a pleasure.

Well thanks so much for having me. I really enjoyed it.

I'm glad, you're very welcome.



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