

## 'Never pass up an opportunity to grow'

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Dr Darshana Morar-Leather

Dr Darshana Morar-Leather of UP's Department of Veterinary Tropical Diseases tell us about her various roles as senior lecturer, researcher, student supervisor, committee member, wife and mother.

As part of UP's Women's Month celebration of #UPWomen, Dr Darshana Morar-Leather of UP's Department of Veterinary Tropical Diseases spoke to Primarashni Gower about her various roles as senior lecturer, researcher, student supervisor, committee member, wife and mother.

### **PG: Tell us about yourself and your educational qualifications.**

**DML:** I've had a keen interest in biology since I was in school, and have always wanted to work in the sciences. Little did I know that I would end up in the wonderful world of veterinary science and be given the opportunity to teach. I am not a veterinarian by training, but I found a career in this field as a result of my research.

In 2001, I obtained a scholarship to work on a unique project at Utrecht University in the Netherlands, on the development of tools towards the design of TB diagnostic tests for use in rhinoceroses and elephants. Soon after, I received my MSc in Veterinary Science (2003); then in 2009, I obtained my PhD in Veterinary Science. I became a junior lecturer in the Department of Veterinary Tropical Diseases at UP in January 2003 and currently hold the position of senior lecturer.

### **PG: What does your role entail?**

**DML:** I teach BVetNurs first-year students basic immunology, and BVSc second-years about immunodiagnostic assays. I coordinate the Primary animal health care module in the BVetNurs I programme and am a coordinator of the BVSc Veterinary research report module.

I am involved in three postgraduate online modules and am responsible for grading some of these assignments. I also supervise and co-supervise MSc and PhD students.

I recently became the co-coordinator of the MSc in Tropical Animal Health, which is a collaborative degree between the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Antwerp and UP's Department of Veterinary Tropical Diseases.

In 2018, I became involved in the development of the BVetNurs curriculum and am part of the following committees: BVetNurs Programme Committee, DVTD Postgraduate and Undergraduate Committees.

In addition, I am part of the Rift Valley Fever Working Group within the Enhancing Research for Africa Network, a network of African and Italian veterinary institutions that promote collaboration and cooperation to address health priorities in Africa.

**PG: What does your current research entail?**

**DML:** I am involved in research on the bacteria *Rickettsia africae* and *Ehrlichia ruminantium*, as well as on *Toxoplasma gondii* and wildlife immunology.

*Rickettsia africae* causes African tick bite fever in humans and is transmitted by ticks called *Amblyomma hebraeum* and *Amblyomma variegatum* in Africa. Along with an MSc student, I plan to work further on this topic, as we have identified a number of gaps in this research area.

A PhD student is currently working on developing a cocktail vaccine for use in goats against *Ehrlichia ruminantium*, a bacterium that causes heartwater disease in ruminants, and can have a devastating economic impact on farmers. I am a co-supervisor on this project.

Toxoplasmosis is a zoonotic disease of mammals, and is caused by the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*. Even though 6% of the human population carry the parasite, many show mild symptoms; it can also be fatal in people with suppressed immune systems and can affect the foetus if a pregnant woman is infected.

**PG: How difficult is it to manage a career and family life?**

**DML:** After I became a mother, I noticed how much we take time for granted. That is when I realised that I need to use time wisely in order to do more. I have the most amazing husband - without his encouragement and wise words (and his sense of humour), it would have been very challenging to manage my career and be a parent. I am also grateful for the support of my colleagues, some of whom I consider to be friends too.

**PG: What are some of the challenges of your job, and what keeps you motivated?**

**DML:** Coming up with unique research ideas and applying for funding are some of the challenges I face. We work in a very competitive environment and you need to keep up. There is a lot of pressure.

**PG: What do you consider a highlight in your career thus far?**

**DML:** When I was nominated by the veterinary nursing class of 2018 for a teaching award. I was blown away by that!

**PG: What are some of the barriers to women assuming leadership roles in the workplace?**

**DML:** Having a disability or a family; cultural backgrounds; inequality (getting paid less for the same job done by a man), jealousy...

**PG: What steps do you think need to be taken to put an end to gender-based violence (GBV)?**

**DML:** In order to tackle GBV, we need to address the underlying problems that plague communities: poor basic education, unemployment, crime, corruption, poverty, hunger, to name a few. We need to educate people and provide them with the resources to uplift themselves. In order to initiate change in a community (and in people) we need to engage with the community to bring about that change, not in a dictatorial way but in a collaborative way, step by step.

A way to get to the root of GBV and other harmful societal challenges is to do research, then implement changes based on the results. But it needs to take an interdisciplinary approach, and one in which government plays an active role, because this is not only the responsibility of scientists but also the responsibility of our leaders.

**PG: What advice would you give to women today?**

**DML:** Never pass up an opportunity to grow. Don't become complacent and always be grateful. Be honest, kind and non-judgemental

Author Primarashni Gower

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