

Leadership Profile: Karima Velji, Winner 2009 Margret Comack Award of Excellence in Nursing Leadership

Karima Velji is vice president of patient care and chief nursing executive at the Toronto Rehabilitation Institute. In this role, she has operational responsibility for an \$80-million budget, 575 beds and seven clinical programs and services in five geographical sites in the Greater Toronto Area. Velji is the

senior leader for patient safety, clinical ethics, education (including interprofessional education) and best practice, and leads professional practice of 12 disciplines at the Toronto Rehabilitation Institute.



Pictured from left: Debra Bournes, Winner 2008; Mary Ferguson-Pare, Winner 2003, Karima Velji, Winner 2009; Chantale LeClerc, Winner 2007; Dorothy Pringle, editor-in-chief, *Canadian Journal of Nursing Leadership*; Esther Green, Winner 2004.

Velji earned her doctoral degree from the University of Toronto's Faculty of Nursing. She holds cross-appointments in the University of Toronto's Faculty of Nursing and McMaster University. She teaches in the graduate program at the University of Toronto, and has been a visiting volunteer faculty and consultant to teaching hospitals in Canada, and to international sites in East Africa, Asia and the Middle East. She is an active volunteer with the Aga Khan Development Network and has undertaken voluntary projects in Afghanistan, Syria, Africa and Pakistan.

Velji has a keen interest in developing and testing interventions in research studies, and transferring knowledge from research to guide practice changes. She has received several funded grants as principal investigator in rehabilitation in the areas of patient safety, nursing practice and interprofessional education. She has led several funded studies in cancer care in the areas of symptom management and quality of life, has presented extensively in national and international forums, and has written several publications.

Velji's responsibilities extend to provincial leadership. She is currently appointed to several professional and leadership groups. She is also an executive member of the Professional Advisory Committee (PAC) of Comprehensive Care International (CCI). She is the incoming Chair of the Council of Academic Health Science Organizations (CAHO) Chief Nursing Group and the Chair of the Policy Committee of Academy of Canadian Executive Nurses (ACEN).

Velji has received many awards, including the Distinguished Alumni Award from the University of Toronto, the Sigma Theta Tau Award of Excellence in nursing administration, the Ontario Hospital Association Distinguished Award of Excellence in nursing leadership, and the Aga Khan Council for Canada Award of Excellence for outstanding professional achievement.

We recently asked Karima Velji to share her thoughts on nursing leadership.

What have you found to be the most important attributes for leadership? Why?

The most important attributes of leadership in a healthcare context are authenticity, courage and a relentless focus on the people we serve. Ultimately, our leadership imperative has to be guided by the needs of patients and families, and an authentic focus on their needs. This requires courageous leadership and advocacy at all levels to ensure that structures and processes are in place to create the best outcomes for patients and families from the perspectives of access, effectiveness, safety and efficiency. High-impact leaders have the ability to see things at all levels, and are driven by the pursuit of finding solutions to create best experiences in a way that matters to those that we serve.

How would you describe your leadership style? Who or what influenced you to adopt this approach to leading?

My personal leadership style can be described as a leader-scholar. I am authentic, patient/family/team-focused, energetic and values- and results-oriented. I am driven by the pursuit of evidence to guide decisions, and to arrive at these decisions in a prudent timeframe. I am personally wired in this manner and have been influenced by mentors who have exemplified values- and results-driven leadership styles.

What is the most satisfying aspect of being a leader? What is the most disappointing?

The most satisfying aspect of being a leader is achieving alignment among all levels of the organization to drive quality of care for those that we serve, and achieving leading-edge results. I am highly motivated by achieving results in creative and innovative ways. Leaders hold privileged positions to influence the care of people who seek our services, and achieving alignment among boards, senior leaders and other levels of the organization to focus on doing that in the best possible way is highly satisfying. Conversely, maintenance mode, misalignment of priorities and getting stuck in silos and processes that don't align with results can be disappointing.

Does leadership in nursing differ from leadership in other professions? If so, how?

I don't believe that core leadership values differ by professional orientation. The evidence-based approach, creativity and innovation do not differ by professional orientation. However, nurse leaders, by virtue of their orientation and experience, tend to focus on bridging the gap between the system and individual patients' experience on a 24/7 basis, landing on practical solutions to enhance patient and family experiences and creating the best systems of care to shape these experiences. They have the ability to affect organizations and systems at multiple levels because nursing care is the largest service provision in most health systems.

Within your various leadership roles, how have you identified up-and-coming leaders? What do you look for in emerging leaders?

The most important quality I look for in emerging leaders is the ability to be guided by those that we serve, an energetic and creative approach to finding solutions based on evidence, an ability to be visionary yet practical and having a relentless approach to achieving results. I am attracted to individuals who are analytical and those that embrace a "can do" attitude. This usually requires an ability to rise above one's own view of things and to embrace a focus on the patient or family and the team who is providing care.

What advice would you offer to aspiring leaders?

First and foremost, you will mostly get it right if you are driven by the voices and needs of patients and their families and the health system as a whole. Next, learn to represent these voices in a way that can be understood and deliberated at all levels of the organization, and drive a focus on results. Lastly and most importantly, be authentic in your approach. At the end of the day, you have to be able to look at yourself and feel good about the difference you have made every day – and the people you have touched in positive ways.