



About Otago

Mō Ōtākou

Ones to Watch: Indira Fernando

[Home](#) / [News and events](#) /



Indira Fernando knew at age eight she wanted to be a doctor.

Determined is one way to describe a student who wants to make a difference for minority groups in the health sector.

Indira Fernando knew at age eight she wanted to be a doctor.

“I grew up being told whatever you do – make it a service. My family has wanted me to go into journalism, but I think they’re okay with my choice,” Indira laughs.

“My mum is a dentist so it makes sense I would follow this path. She studied at Otago and I grew up with pictures of her outside of the Clocktower and Carrington, so now I get to take pictures outside the Clocktower, and I also lived at Carrington in my first year.”

The Sri-Lankan born, 22-year-old found herself in a tough place during the first year of her degree back in 2017 when a mysterious illness changed her plans.

I couldn't walk properly for six months that year, my first year of Health Sciences. I had to return to Australia for treatment and I remember sitting in the Rheumatologists office wondering – 'is this it? Is life as I know it over?'"

"I got really sick and was no longer able to walk. My mum flew to New Zealand as she was still living in Australia at the time. She would sleep on the floor of my dorm and take me to my appointments. She advocated on my behalf to get answers and finally I received a diagnosis of Atypical Reactive Arthritis. I couldn't walk properly for six months that year, my first year of Health Sciences. I had to return to Australia for treatment and I remember sitting in the Rheumatologists office wondering – 'is this it? Is life as I know it over?'"

It was not the end of the road for the student who was determined to achieve her lifelong goal.

"I returned the following year. I was privileged - my mum has a medical background and could help me navigate the system to get answers and the right treatment. She returned to New Zealand with me and took up a job here at the School of Dentistry."

Since returning Indira has not only thrown her heart and soul into her studies, but has also become an advocate for others in minority groups.

"I do advocacy work for the rainbow community in the medical space. I'm one of the founding members and the Secretary for Rainbow Otago Medical Students Association (ROMSA) and then I sit on the executive team for Otago University Medical Students Association (OUMSA) and on the Officer Team for the New Zealand Medical Students Association (NZMSA) as well.

"People need to know that by just being here you make it easier for others. Just by being here as a sick, queer, woman of colour I make it easier for other people. This is what I would say to other students from minority backgrounds who want to pursue studies here."

"I recently gave a talk at a symposium about how lecturers can make their mahi more rainbow aware – that's a lot of the kind of work I do with ROMSA. With support from OUMSA and NZMSA, Lane McLeod (ROMSA President) and myself have been working on getting pronoun badges for University and Polytech students working in the health sector to raise awareness and encourage inclusivity."

For Indira acknowledging privilege and being aware of other people's backgrounds is hugely important in the medical field this is something she plans to bring to the table.

“There were so many things going against me, but I am lucky in so many ways. I have an invisible illness, people can’t tell by looking at me that I am queer, I speak English yet I’m an immigrant. I say all of this from an immense place of privilege and yet there are barriers for me as there will be for other people. People need to know that by just being here you make it easier for others. Just by being here as a sick, queer, woman of colour I make it easier for other people. This is what I would say to other students from minority backgrounds who want to pursue studies here.”

As well as knowing she wanted to be a doctor, Indira felt it was important learn about history too. As it turns out, history and medicine are an important combination to make changes to how medical professionals look after people. Not only that but Indira’s own life events are setting her up to apply personal experience to her chosen field.

“When I arrived at Otago I discovered I could do a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery as well as study History. I’m actually the only person currently to be doing both which has been exciting too.”

Recently, Indira has been researching historical media coverage of medical submissions and says discrimination looks different but is very much the same even today.

“I want to be the doctor who listens to what people have to say and takes them seriously when others’ may not have. I want to be the doctor I wish I had when I was in the hospital myself.”

“I’ve been doing this research for the Kōhatu Centre for Hauroa Māori supervised by Professor Peter Crampton as a result of my double degree in History and Medicine. My research is looking at the historical institutional barriers Māori and Pasifika students have faced when getting into Medicine. It’s similar to modern struggles but it can look different – the racism, the transphobia, the ableism they are all present issues which keep people down.

“There are a lot of people who are trying to move the dial forward but what I’ve found from personal experience as a patient but also from my learning at Medical School is that as a medical professional you have to know the people. You can know the biology but if you don’t know the people then how far is your medical knowledge going to get you? It’s so much more than cells and it’s on those medical professionals to educate themselves.

“Having experienced being sick, I’ve seen and been seen by some amazing doctors and some not so amazing doctors. I want to be the doctor who listens to what people have to say and takes them seriously when others’ may not have. I want to be the doctor I wish I had when I was in the hospital myself.”

Kōrero by Internal Communications Adviser, Chelsea McRae