

Humans of CDI

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Dr. Erica Warner is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Medicine at Harvard Medical School and an Assistant Investigator at Massachusetts General Hospital where she conducts epidemiological research on cancer in the Mongan Institute's Clinical Translational Epidemiology Unit.

Dr. Warner's research studies how lifestyle, behavioral, and genetic factors affect cancer screening, and intermediate markers of cancer risk, cancer risk and survival, with an interest in racial/ethnic and socioeconomic health disparities and advancing health equity. Dr. Warner is the Director of Epidemiology for the MGH Cancer Center's Early Detection and Diagnostics Clinic, Deputy Associate Director for Membership for the Dana-Farber Harvard Cancer Center.

She is a winner of the Dean's Community Service Award from the Office for Diversity Inclusion and Community Partnership at Harvard Medical School and was named a Diversity Scholar by the Nutrition Obesity Research Center at Harvard and is a past recipient of the MGH CDI Physician and/or Scientist Development Award.

To learn more about Dr. Erica Warner, a leading cancer epidemiologist dedicated to advancing health equity, and her remarkable journey through research, mentorship, and advocacy, keep reading.

What inspired you to pursue a career in cancer epidemiology, particularly focusing on health disparities? Can you tell us more about your journey? How did you get to where you are today and what's been your why?

I've had a lifelong interest in science and health. I initially thought that would lead to becoming a physician, but I found that I was more interested in questions about populations and their risks of disease, than individuals. At my first job after college at the National Cancer Institute (NCI) at the Center to Reduce Cancer Health Disparities I learned about disparities and combined with experiences of cancer in my family, felt moved to contribute to the fight for cancer health equity. While at NCI I had the pleasure of working with a great mentor Dr. Garcia and he introduced me to epidemiology as a tool for understanding my underlying question of why some people get cancer and some don't. He pointed me to an epidemiology course for employees taught by faculty from Johns Hopkins and the rest, as they say, is history.

What impact has receiving the Physician/Scientist Development Award had on your career and research? How has your involvement with CDI influenced your professional development?

The PSDA was very helpful in several key ways. First, it provided support for me to hire a full-time clinical research coordinator, and this exponentially increased my research capacity through delegating tasks and teamwork. It also was a boost psychologically, it's great to be selected for something as prestigious of this work and to be recognized for excellence and future potential. Lastly, it supported a very important research project that I think will be foundational for more work to come. CDI has been a great way to meet people, engage with trainees, and feel supported and connected to MGH.

From your perspective, why are awards like the PSDA and engagement with organizations such as CDI crucial for the advancement of underrepresented faculty within academic medicine? How do they contribute to the broader scientific community?

I think it is important to be seen and appreciated and underrepresented faculty get that from CDI. It also facilitates community-building and fosters safe spaces which are essential when facing the challenges associated with being underrepresented in medicine. With respect to the PDSA, funding is essential for a career in research, both to be able to do the work, and to demonstrate the importance of your work through being rigorously evaluated and selected for funding.

You recently participated in CDI's Student Final Presentations as an evaluator. As someone who has been involved with SRTP in various capacities, how has your experience shaped your approach to mentoring? What insights would you share with mentors guiding PhD students, and what advice would you offer to the students themselves?

I think seeing the SRTP students really highlights the depth and breadth of what students can accomplish when they are provided opportunity and support. For me it makes me want to continue to mentor and support the development of students and other trainees.

As a health services researcher committed to addressing cancer disparities, how do you view the role of PhD scientists in advancing this field? What message of encouragement or inspiration would you share with both mentors and mentees about the importance of their contributions and the impact they can have on future breakthroughs?

I think PhD scientists are essential in advancing our understanding health disparities, their causes, and potential solutions. Through collaboration with clinicians, we can identify and implement interventions. I think that it can be difficult sometimes when the process of research feels disconnected from our personal goals and motivations. It's important to stay grounded in purpose and routinely reflect on our alignment with that purpose and passion that brought us to the field. I stay grounded through community focused activities and engagement and mentoring. I think everyone should find that for themselves. Those experiences can lead to new insights and breakthroughs.

What don't people know about you? What would people be surprised to learn about you?

I'm a huge tennis fan. I really enjoy using tennis as a vehicle to travel the world. I have a lifetime goal of attending all the grand slam tournaments and I have been lucky enough to attend Roland Garros, Wimbledon, and the US Open. Only the Australian Open is left. I have a research collaboration with investigators in Melbourne, Australia. I had the pleasure of visiting them last year and I look forward to going again in time for the Aussie Open and checking that off my list too.

What is your proudest moment/contribution to the work?

I worked for two summers with an undergraduate student through at DF/HCC program and the paper that resulted from that work was recently accepted at the Journal of Clinical Oncology. I'm very proud that this former student will be a first author on a paper published in a prestigious journal. It's great to see it come to fruition.