



Dhiraj - far right - with the IPCRG colleagues in 2019



Boosting Research Careers



*Dhiraj Agarwal
KEM lead researcher
and project manager*

Dhiraj Agarwal reflects on the value of engaging with IPCRG to develop his research career

Introduction

IPCRG is committed to engaging more early career researchers in our work. This interview, with Dr Dhiraj Agarwal, explored how he started in research, and how collaboration with IPCRG has been mutually beneficial on his career path.

In 2018, as a young researcher in Pune nearing completion of his PhD, Dhiraj was invited to join the IPCRG's former research sub-committee following a recommendation from Prof Hilary Pinnock, University of Edinburgh with whom IPCRG was working on the NIHR-funded RESPIRE programme. Since then, he has been involved in our Research school and in our iQ&A service.

Dhiraj has recently been recognised as a PhD Research Guide by the Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune, India. This achievement has been enabled by the guidance and support of his mentor, Prof. Sanjay Juvekar at KEMHRC, Vadu (<https://www.kemhrcvadu.org/>), and the opportunities provided by the IPCRG and NIHR RESPIRE which helped Dhiraj to grow as a researcher and academic.

Why did you become interested in research?

As a boy, I would see researchers from the KEM Hospital Vadu come to our village (which is part of Vadu Health and Demographic Surveillance System area) for different research activities. This interested me and was something I wanted to do later. Then, when studying, I was inspired by role models who were tackling health problems faced among the population, so to work for the KEM Hospital Research Centre was a natural step. My journey to become a researcher also owes a lot to the mentorship I have received, and this is something I would like to pass on to potential or new researchers.

What made you become involved in respiratory research?

The opportunities of combining microbiome laboratory and field based work were exciting and COPD was an interesting area to study. This interest then led me to become involved in RESPIRE.

What made you get involved with the IPCRG?

Becoming part of the spirometry study in RESPIRE brought me in contact with UK researchers, such as Hilary Pinnock, who encouraged me to become involved in the IPCRG, first as an observer to the research sub-committee and then as a regular member. People like Siân Williams at the IPCRG were supportive and motivated me to be involved.

How did your involvement with the IPCRG develop?

Having received a RESPIRE fellowship grant at Edinburgh (<https://www.ed.ac.uk/usher/respire/respire-fellowships/dhiraj-agarwal>) I had the opportunity to be invited to the IPCRG world conference in Portugal in 2018. I was also able to be part of the qualitative research workshop IPCRG led for RESPIRE and with our group from India I was involved with winning one of the research awards. I also joined the iQ&A answer review group, helping to produce answers on COVID and key clinical practice concerns. The opportunity the IPCRG has given me to review papers has been an important academic achievement. These experiences really helped to build my understanding of working in international respiratory research.

What do you think your key achievements have been?

I think the main achievement is in spirometry where we defined normative values for the Indian population so clinicians can interpret spirometry data. The clinical algorithm enables clinicians to distinguish between conditions such as COPD, asthma and TB. This work is published, and we plan to implement the use of these values in future studies.

How does it feel to be recognised as a PhD Research Guide from Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune (SPPU, Pune)?

I was delighted to be recognised, and for me it marks a point in my career where I become more independent and can pass on my own experiences to others.

How have the opportunities in IPCRG enabled you to grow in the field of research?

The interaction with leading researchers has been crucial in increasing my confidence and understanding better how to get messages across, as well as helping to polish my research skills. Credit is especially due to Siân Williams, Hilary Pinnock, Alice Malpass and Hans Wouters, although I have learnt from many colleagues in the research school, sub-committee, and iQ&A team. Another key point is the perspective and learning gained from working with people in other countries.



Dhiraj - far right - with RESPIRE colleagues at ERS 2019

What have been the main challenges you have faced in developing your research work?

One of the main barriers has been having the confidence to communicate and express myself in fluent English. Fortunately, my colleagues have been very supportive, and the international environment in both the IPCRG and RESPIRE helps in this. My mentors were also key in encouraging me to co-ordinate a project in 4 countries (<https://www.ed.ac.uk/usher/respire/chronic-respiratory-disorders/estimating-chronic-respiratory-disease-burden>), which would otherwise have been an intimidating opportunity. The process of leading and being involved has helped to increase my confidence.

What do you plan to do next?

The next step for me is to move towards being an independent researcher, leading my own research. This involves building my network and developing more strategies to gain and carry out research. I also plan to carry on teaching and to pass on the same journey and opportunities that I have had to students. There is scope to improve academic system within the country, so there is a lot of work to be done and the higher the quality of the work the more interest there will be.

What advice do you have for starting researchers?

Networking is important and it is worth building contacts even at student levels. This practical experience of networking should also be taught to help people be more productive. I would also advise people to try to achieve qualification up to post graduate level, and where possible to aim for a PhD in particular field.



Dhiraj - second from right - with BOLD team at ERS in Spain 2019