



Profile

Jaime Miranda: nurturing future public health researchers

Jaime Miranda had just finished his first day as Professor and Head of School at the Sydney School of Public Health, University of Sydney, NSW, Australia, when we spoke in late April, 2023. He had spent part of the day on the ground floor of the school to “get to know people” and tell them he is “going to be working with them and for them for the next 5 years at least”. Miranda, who has a warm and unpretentious style, combines this new role with his positions as Professor in the School of Medicine at the Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia (UPCH) in Lima, Peru, Professor of Global Health at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), UK, and Bernard Lown Scholar in Cardiovascular Health at Harvard University, Boston, MA, USA. His research focuses on the epidemiological, health systems, and health policy aspects of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in low-income and middle-income countries (LMICs), including obesity, hypertension, diabetes, and depression.

Miranda is purposefully broad in his work: “I tend to describe myself as the unfocused one”, he says. He also seeks to “bring together people from different specialties and find a common path and find a common way”. As he comments: “I’m able to navigate ideas and to pursue that with teams that wouldn’t have met otherwise”. For example, one of his projects used artificial intelligence to produce an algorithm to detect early signs of skin changes before the onset of diabetic foot ulcers. “For that, I had to talk to engineers, with an economist, with clinical people”, he says. In other research, Miranda and colleagues “teamed up with a behavioural economist” to do a cluster randomised trial to evaluate the effect of one-off health advice given by priests in Catholic parishes in Peru. Roger Glass, President of the China Medical Board and former Director of the Fogarty International Center, National Institutes of Health (NIH), USA, says Miranda “is a true rising star in the field and has earned this high reputation because of his outstanding and collaborative research, publications, and policy perspectives”.

Miranda grew up in the coastal industrial town of Chimbote, Peru, and encouraged by his mother, a schoolteacher, decided to study medicine. He moved to the capital, Lima, just before turning 16 years old to start his 8-year medical degree at UPCH. After earning his MD, he worked to connect Indigenous communities in the rural Andes to health services, before moving to the UK to work at University College London (UCL) in 2002. Miranda coordinated international health electives for medical students at what is now UCL’s Institute for Global Health. In parallel, colleagues ran an intercalated BSc on international health. “That environment was natural for me in the sense that I could see multiple voices, multiple fields coming together and making sense together”, he says. Miranda’s collaborator and friend Jonathan Wells, Professor of

Anthropology and Paediatric Nutrition at UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health, UK, describes Miranda as “simultaneously very motivated, very bright, very generous, and an extraordinarily warm person...who has a phenomenal rate of work, and yet who never seems to be in a rush”. He calls his way of working “infectiously enjoyable”, adding that “his generosity is constantly apparent—trying to make every activity into an opportunity for early career researchers”.

Under the mentorship of Liam Smeeth, Miranda secured a Wellcome Trust scholarship for an MSc and then a PhD in epidemiology at LSHTM, examining cardiovascular risk in Peru’s migrant population. During his PhD, encouraged by US mentor Robert Gilman, he successfully applied to the NIH to establish a centre of excellence in chronic diseases in Peru at UPCH. Launched in 2009 with Miranda as its Director, the centre was named CRONICAS, because of its chronic disease focus and because it means chronicles in Spanish and “we were going to tell a story—the adventure of setting up a team to do chronic disease research in Latin America”, at a time when few in the region were studying NCDs. The centre’s values are generosity, integrity, innovation, and quality and Miranda forged a strong multidisciplinary team “by listening to people and playing to our strengths”. He is proud that there are now researchers in the region “who have been trained and live by the standards and values of CRONICAS”. In 2018, Miranda took an unusual step: he spent a year travelling with his wife and three children around South America and worked remotely. He later became a Visiting Professorial Fellow at the George Institute for Global Health in Sydney, Australia, and then a Distinguished Fellow there.

In his new role at the Sydney School of Public Health, Miranda plans to provide “research leadership”. But he is also keen for Australia to share its story. “We have this tendency, particularly from LMICs, to look to the US and the UK and Europe for good health examples.” But Australia “really has experiences to tell the world...there’s so many good examples happening here, particularly for public health”, he says. Miranda wants to “nurture the next generation with a very global oriented focus and inject that sense of responsibility” of communicating, sharing, and being part of the global community. And he aims to instil these values in his usual collaborative style. Citing the American author Simon Sinek, he says: “A team is not a group of people that works together. A team is a group of people that trust each other.” And for Miranda he also intends “to bring that tranquillity, particularly to the younger generation who are the future. So, I will say ‘guys, I know it’s difficult, it’s hard, let’s make it an adventure that you’re proud of.’”

Udani Samarasekera



Pablo Tsukayama