

Beyond the Mask Profile



Dr. Tania Di Renna

Dr. Tania Di Renna is the first-ever Medical Director of the Toronto Academic Pain Medicine Institute. Launched in 2017, TAPMI is focused on chronic pain and is a natural fit for Tania, whose passion for treating chronic pain evolved out of her desire for a longitudinal relationship with patients. The former Medical Director at The Ottawa Hospital Pain Clinic, Tania is also active as a staff anesthesiologist at several downtown Toronto hospitals, where her goal is to prevent patients from ever having to turn to TAPMI. “Anesthesiology is that exciting specialty that allows you to make change,” says Tania, “Fifty per cent of surgeries can lead to a chronic pain condition and so here you are with the opportunity to prevent that.”

Dr. Jane Cooke-Lauder, the Section’s strategic consultant, and Lindsay Kneteman, the Section’s Coordinator, recently spoke with Tania to learn about her leadership story and its three defining refrains: *Dream big and don’t be afraid of failure; Take action yourself and enable agency in others; and, Teamwork matters!*

Dream big and don’t be afraid of failure

When Tania was asked about her goals for TAPMI, she jokingly says, “world domination” but her straight answer isn’t far off. In late 2016, when she first started, the objective was clear: bring together downtown Toronto’s five major pain clinics into one entity that would deliver better and quicker service to more patients. She started the process by mapping the patient’s experience, aiming to minimize as many barriers to timely care as possible. “We had to think outside the box,” she recalls. Changes included streamlining the triage pathway, developing active waiting strategies for waitlisted patients, and even delivering some services in a group setting. The result has been nothing short of a transformation in terms of how chronic pain is treated in Toronto and the 4,000 patients who are referred each year to TAPMI. Next stop: “influence the treatment of chronic pain across the world.”

To Tania, the privilege of leadership is that it allows you to be innovative, “not just in the clinical space but also in health delivery.” However, success does not come without risk taking and with risk, there is always the chance of failure. In Tania’s mind, your attitude in the face of failure really defines who you are. She notes that great leaders learn from failure and keep it in perspective so that they can dream big and innovate relentlessly.

She recalls a day some years ago, shortly after returning to work following her first maternity leave. The OR was in chaos following two code blues in a row and Tania found herself feeling out of control, “I remember yelling at a poor medical student because I thought he was an anesthesiologist assistant.” Suddenly she realized what she was doing, “I remember not liking who I was and deciding there and then to make a change.”

So she did. With the help of a book about cognitive behavioral therapy for emotional regulation, she began teaching herself techniques to control her emotions and be mindful. “Now when there’s a crisis in the OR, I just take a deep breath, slow down my heartbeat and speak clearly and calmly.” Today, she often gets feedback that she is the calmest person in the room. To Tania, taking control of her own behavior in a critical situation has been life changing. She finds herself showing up in all sorts of difficult situations with more confidence and capacity.

Take action and enable others

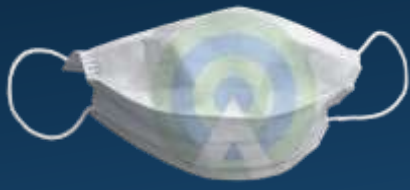
“I’ve never stood by and let other people do things for me,” she says. She traces her strong leadership skills and drive for action to growing up in an immigrant household in a working-class part of Toronto. She thanks her parents for instilling a strong work ethic in her, noting, “My parents always taught us, ‘Work is not a luxury, it’s an opportunity’.”

Being ready and able to act from a physical and mental health standpoint is the responsibility of each and every physician, although Tania acknowledges that this can be easier said than done, especially when it comes to mental health. She notes that there has been a lot of focus lately on external ways of self-care, “We really don’t take the opportunity to work on our inner selves.” Tania is trying to change that by recommending CBT to her colleagues and residents.

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Beyond taking action herself, over the years, Tania has realized the power of individual agency: each person having the capability and a sufficient sense of self-efficacy to act independently and make choices. She believes that one of the most powerful methods for preventing and treating pain is enabling patients to understand what is needed and how they can best help themselves. She describes words as an intervention that are just as valid as the prescription pad and one that physicians, including anesthesiologists, should be using more often. “People don’t know what to do with their pain post-op so tell them what to do,” says Tania. “You need to change people’s mindsets from ‘how do I remove this pain’ to ‘how do I live with it’ and the only way to do that is through education.”



She has a similar view with respect to expanding the capacity of the system: build physician confidence to extend their scope of practice. Tania also runs a mobile clinic where she teaches primary care doctors to feel comfortable treating some chronic pain patients in their own clinic. Explains Tania, “Education can empower physicians and increase capacity so that we can do something different about all of our wait lists.”

Teamwork matters

Typical of Tania, when talking about her work and in this case, TAPMI, she is quick to point out the role played by others: “There’s nothing I’ve ever achieved in this academic pain program by myself; this is a collaboration.” Given her driving passion to be of service, she enrolls supporters to contribute to the mission of helping others. This has meant developing the ability to flex her style and approach. When working with admin counterparts, she explains the different realities of the parties that can get in the way of a productive relationship: “Physicians tend to come out and ask for unicorns,” she says referring to doctors’ predisposition to dream big and to want the best for their patients. “We don’t understand that our administrators are dealing with limited funds and have to act at times like squirrels, hoarding their funding in case of unexpected demands or further shortages.”

Says Tania, “My leadership strategy is to be understanding of people’s perspectives, be flexible and be collaborative so that we can all reach the shared goal.”

Building strong, authentic relationships with her colleagues is also important, particularly when leading change. In the case of TAPMI, “I really had to sit down and listen to what everyone was worried about,” she says. Any call to action must take into account shared values. For physicians, this often entails helping people. Again, in the case of TAPMI, “The fundamental selling point was that the patients would do better if we all came together and worked together,” she explains. The results achieved speak volumes as to how well these approaches can work.

Tania practices these same values at home where her husband, a successful plastic and reconstructive surgeon, shares household and childcare duties. “He understands that my success as a leader is also his success as a physician,” says Tania who notes that success in a leadership role is much more difficult without the support of loved ones.

In wrapping up, Tania returns to the importance of working as a team. She sees the anesthesiology specialty as being better equipped than others to lead system change. She recognizes that not every anesthesiologist will seize the opportunity to take on a leadership role and that leadership is not for everyone. And that is why teamwork is so important. “There’s beauty and incredible value in those colleagues who perform the clinical work that allows leaders to go to meetings and teach and do other daytime work,” Tania explains, “We all have a part to play.”

BTM Working Group Member Spotlight



Dr. Chris Harle

Dr. Chris Harle has been volunteering with Beyond the Mask since it launched in 2015. “I firmly believe that we need to define our own identity and to promote our essential specialty,” says Chris, “BTM is designed to do exactly that —facilitate the opportunities to lead as well as to confer some accountability on us.”

As an international medical graduate having trained in South Africa, England and the USA, Chris now works as a consultant anesthesiologist at London Health Sciences Centre, where he specialized in cardiac anesthesiology. He is also an Associate Professor at Western University.

After helping to bring the successful Choosing Wisely Campaign to life, Chris is now playing a key role in BTM’s new Pain Management Project, which aims in Phase One, to reduce the number of unnecessary opioid prescriptions.

Noting that anesthesiologists are the experts on opioids, he explains that it is imperative that the Section be part of the dialog around the opioid crisis, “We need to be seen as positive contributors, change agents and collaborators in a multi-jurisdictional, multi-faceted and multi-disciplinary phenomenon.” Chris believes that the Pain Management Project will result in better patient care and responsible prescribing as well as serve as a platform for future collaborative leadership initiatives, both around the opioid crisis and other healthcare issues.

Chris also sits on the BTM Steering Committee, where he serves as a crucial link between BTM and the Executive Committee, which he has been a part of since 2014. This past January, Chris completed his term as Chair. Known for deftly finding the right balance between leading from the front while also listening and collaborating with others, Chris will remain with the Executive as the Past-Chair, with the mandate to continue to work on increasing the Section’s presence with Stakeholders. We thank Chris for all of his hard work with both BTM and the Executive.

Says Chris, “Our specialty is uniquely positioned at the interface of so many facets of healthcare; clinically, politically and administratively. This confers on us both the opportunity and the responsibility to lead.”