

Working with the women of Tamil Nadu to Solve a Public Health Dilemma



The women and children of Tamil Nadu await their turn to be interviewed by YSN's Shona McNeil

IMAGINE A VILLAGE IN SOUTHERN INDIA. A line of sari-clad women, most clutching infants or toddlers, snakes down a dirt road. On a sunny afternoon, they brave 100-degree plus temperatures to wait at a crowded doorway.

What are these women waiting for?

Just inside the door calmly sits Shona McNeil, a third-year YSN student in the FNP specialty. As part of a Downs Fellowship for the summer of 2003, Shona has traveled to the villages and urban slums of the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu to research childhood diarrhea. *Continued on page 10*



Shona McNeil (above with friends she made in Tamil Nadu) was awarded the Milton and Anne Sidney Prize during the ysn Commencement on May 24, 2004. This prestigious award recognizes one ysn student each year whose research praxis best exemplifies ysn's commitment to clinical scholarship and contributes to the School's mission: better health care for all people



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She brings with her no food, no medicines, no tangible gifts. Shona is equipped only with questionnaires and interview forms, yet these women wait to speak with her. With the aid of her two Tamil-speaking interpreters, Shona interviews all the women in the line, speaking with each for between ten and twenty minutes. Over the course of the summer, she will gather data from over 900 Tamil mothers, far exceeding her expected sample size of 100.

This anecdote, typical of Shona's experience, is a fitting testament to the relevance of her work. Shona's project, “An Assessment of the Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices Surrounding Use of Oral Rehydration Solution (ORS) during Episodes of Childhood Diarrhea in Tamil Nadu, India,” involves the mothers of children under 5 years of age. These children are among the most most vulnerable to dehydration which can result from acute episodes of diarrhea. In fact, as Shona quickly points out, despite major technological advancements in health care, diarrhea continues to kill 1,300,000 children each year, making it the second leading cause of death for children under 5. “I wanted to do something that was applicable anywhere I would go in the world,” explains Shona, “and diarrhea is such a problem worldwide.”

Shona's experience as a Downs Fellow brought her to some of the most remote areas of Tamil Nadu, both geographically and culturally, and exposed her to phenomena for which even her previous international experiences in Mexico and Guatemala did not prepare her. After three weeks of working and traveling through the state, a glance at the other passengers revealed that men and women sat separately on buses. “I remember realizing, ‘Oh my God, I've been sitting on the wrong side this whole time,’” Shona exclaims.

With the use of house-to-house data collection methods, Shona was able to speak with a great number of Tamil women to survey their understanding and use of ORS. Shona has recently completed her data analysis. She has been able to discern that “attitudes toward ORS were mostly positive, although there were many misconceptions about it, and most women did not use it correctly.” Shona's analysis indicates that nearly half of the participants believed that ORS is intended to stop diarrhea, a misconception that may often lead to the treatment's discontinuation. Marge Funk, ysn professor and Shona's advisor (with Henry Binder, MD), states that “ORS is such a simple solution to the problem.” She adds that this “elegantly simple” and “really important” study stands a “much better chance of being representative with such a large and [geographically] varied sample.”

In the future, Shona, who states that “clinical days are my best days,” plans to continue to pursue community health work. As a National Health Service Corps scholar, Shona would like to work in a rural setting, potentially the Louisiana bayou or Appalachia, doing “the hands-on parts of nursing.” She adds, “You can never predict what your future will be, but I definitely see myself working internationally.” Shona does not rule out a return to research, either, and considers working in the design and implementation of public health interventions aimed at alleviating health problems among those who live in cramped conditions like refugee camps. As she concludes, “research plays a part in everything you do.”