

RESEARCHER SPOTLIGHT

BUILDING DIGITAL HEALTH RESEARCH THAT STARTS WITH PEOPLE: DR. VAYSHALI PATEL’S JOURNEY

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Dr. Vayshali Patel’s career has been shaped by curiosity, unexpected opportunities, and a commitment to research that can improve people’s lives. Today, as a Senior Research Associate at the Canada Excellence Research Chair in Health Equity and Community Wellbeing (CERC HECW) at Toronto Metropolitan University, Dr. Patel leads and supports research exploring digital health, disability, and equitable access to healthcare. Her work examines how technology can better serve communities while ensuring lived experiences remain at the forefront of research and policy.

VAYSHALI’S AREAS OF EXPERTISE

Digital Health Technologies

- Devices and software that help improve patient care and support wellbeing.
- Mixed-methods research focused on understanding and developing disability-centred digital health communications and systems.

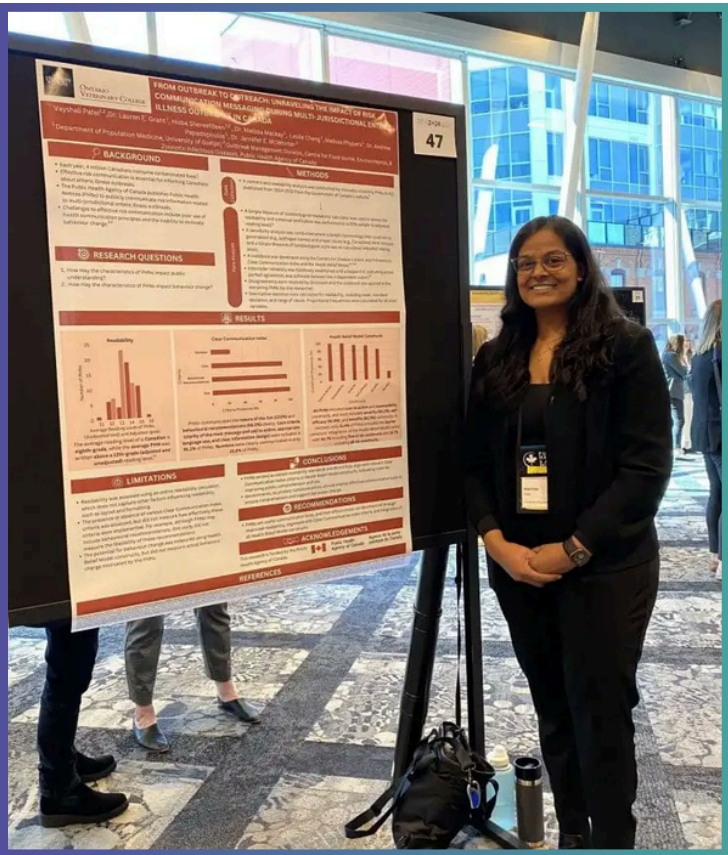
Health Equity and Community Wellbeing with a Focus on Disability Populations

- Ensuring people with disabilities have a fair and equitable opportunity to reach their highest level of health and quality of life.

Dr. Patel began her academic journey at the University of Guelph, earning a Bachelor of Science in Biomedical Science between 2018 and 2022. During her undergraduate studies, she also completed training as a personal support worker (PSW), working directly with patients in healthcare settings. Initially, medicine seemed like the obvious next step. However, her experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic changed her perspective.

Dr. Patel became more interested in how diseases are prevented in the first place, rather than treatment after someone becomes ill. That interest led her toward public health and epidemiology. She was originally accepted into a master’s program at the University of British Columbia, where she planned to study HIV prevention among Indigenous women in Vancouver through a project examining the effects of intergenerational trauma. Even though she was passionate about the research, the project unfortunately lacked funding.

As she continued to work as a PSW to save money, an unexpected opportunity arrived. A professor from the University of Guelph reached out to her about a graduate research position. Immersing herself in the professor’s work, Dr. Patel prepared extensively for the interview and secured the position. The research focused



on foodborne disease, health communication, and epidemiology. What began as a master's project became something much bigger. Since the project became too big for one master's student to handle, her supervisors asked if she'd be willing to upgrade to the PhD program. She accepted the offer and completed her doctorate, developing expertise in epidemiology, public health, and health communication.

After defending her PhD in July 2025, Dr. Patel expected to continue working in epidemiology. However, she graduated during a period when many COVID-19-related research grants had ended, leading to funding cuts across public health research.

Instead of following the career path she had originally planned, Dr. Patel expanded her search beyond academia and explored opportunities across multiple sectors. When she received the opportunity to work at the CERC HECW, she accepted. What initially felt like an unexpected turn became a rewarding new chapter in her career.

Since joining the CERC HECW, Dr. Patel has helped establish a growing digital health technologies and methods research portfolio. One of the first initiatives to emerge is a national study exploring the digital healthcare experiences of Canadian women living with multiple sclerosis (MS).

Developed in partnership with MS Canada and DAWN Canada, the project will launch a nationwide survey designed to better understand participants' experiences with digital healthcare while examining how social and demographic factors influence outcomes. The findings from the study aim to support more equitable digital health systems for people living with MS. Dr. Patel also contributes to CERC HECW's research examining access to primary healthcare for disabled women.

While existing research often focuses on patient experiences, she hopes future work will also examine healthcare providers' perspectives.

Barriers such as racism, sexism, and ageism have been identified, and Dr. Patel hopes to understand where they come from so they can be addressed.

Although Dr. Patel enjoys the analytical side of research, she says the most meaningful part of her work happens outside of statistical models and publications. For her, the relationships built with community members are just as important as the research itself. Making people feel as if they are heard and understood is what Dr. Patel believes makes the most impact. She believes researchers have a responsibility to use their positions to amplify community voices and ensure research contributes to meaningful change.



Having joined the CERC HECW in November 2025, Dr. Patel is still helping shape the next generation of digital health research within the organization. She looks forward to expanding partnerships with community organizations, engaging more with people whose experiences inform the research, and continuing to grow projects that connect technology, health equity, and disability. She believes meaningful research starts with understanding people's lived experiences, and ensuring those experiences help shape the healthcare systems of tomorrow.