APIC 2017 sneak peek:
The art of conversation and mindfulness

Q & A with APIC plenary speakers
Celeste Headlee and Sanjay Saint

INTERVIEWS BY ELIZABETH GARMAN

APIC 2017, which takes place June 14-16 in Portland, Oregon, promises to provide a robust learning experience with more than 90 educational sessions and workshops led by experts from across the globe. A highlight is always the plenary sessions, which offer new perspective on common infection prevention issues. This year’s plenary speakers will surely add a new dimension to your thinking. Prevention Strategist recently spoke with Celeste Headlee and Sanjay Saint, MD, MPH, for a sneak peek of what they plan to cover during their keynote presentations.

PS: How did you become an expert on having good conversations?
CH: I was working as a host on the public radio show “The Takeaway” in 2009, and I wanted to hone my interviewing skills. I read everything I could find on interviewing, then I moved on to researching good conversations. But when I tried implementing the advice I'd gotten (nod your head, maintain eye contact), it didn’t work. It usually backfired. So I started consulting brain science on how we relate to one another, how we interact. I consulted social science on how different cultures communicate, and I read psychological studies on communication and bias. I ended up with new insights into conversation, and I found that the same tactics I used in the studio doing interviews worked just as well at home and at the office. Good conversation is good conversation, no matter where it happens.

PS: You’ve said that most people don’t converse very well. What you mean by that?
CH: First, we mostly talk about ourselves. Studies show we talk about ourselves 60 percent of the time. While that may not sound like too much, remember that everything else is only 40 percent. Everything else you could possibly talk about, from your job to politics to your dog to food, only makes up 40 percent of your conversation. We also don’t listen. The average amount of space between the end of one person’s sentence and the beginning of the other person’s response is only 200 milliseconds. That is only one-fifth of a second! That means we’re not really hearing what someone says, thinking about it, and responding. That means we already know what we’re going to say, and we’re just waiting for the other person to take a breath so we can talk.

PS: What advice do you have for becoming a better listener?
CH: Try to listen for the underlying message behind someone’s words. What are the bigger themes? What are they really saying? It will help you stay engaged.

Celeste Headlee — best-known as the award-winning journalist, author, public speaker, and vocalist host of the show “On Second Thought,” which airs on Georgia Public Broadcasting radio — will be the opening plenary speaker at APIC 2017. Focusing on the fundamentals of communication, Celeste will share practical strategies for enhancing your professional and personal relationships through the art of conversation and focused listening. Celeste’s TEDx talk, “Ten Ways to Have Better Conversations,” has been viewed more than seven million times.
The ability to communicate a message clearly and to understand what others tell you. Sounds simple, but it’s devilishly hard.”

PS: What can APIC members do to have effective conversations with people in their healthcare facilities who have very different jobs from them?
CH: Don’t try to educate. Informing is different from educating. In one instance, you’re presenting what you know, asking questions, and responding to what they say. In the other, you’re not really listening to what they say but, instead, lecturing on what you know. The best things you can do to converse with people in different jobs is to listen and ask questions.

PS: What is conversational competence?
CH: The ability to communicate a message clearly and to understand what others tell you. Sounds simple, but it’s devilishly hard. Our messages get garbled, and we have a hard time listening to what is actually said instead of hearing some words and key phrases and making assumptions.

PS: What is next for you in your career?
CH: My second book will be published by Harper Wave next year, and I hope it might help people begin to talk to strangers again. I’ve become a conversational evangelist. I hope to hold conversation events in various cities, where I sit down in a coffee shop and start conversations with people, show them how easy it is to talk about even complicated matters. There’s no reason to fear conversation with anyone, even if they disagree with you politically.

Sanjay Saint, MD, MPH, will deliver the closing keynote presentation at the APIC Annual Conference on June 16. Back by popular demand, Saint was the recipient of APIC’s Distinguished Scientist award at APIC 2015, where he presented an excerpt from his TEDxUofM talk entitled “Improving Healthcare: Straight from the Heart.” Saint is the George Dock Professor of Internal Medicine at the University of Michigan, the director of the VA/University of Michigan Patient Safety Enhancement Program, and the chief of medicine at the VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System.

PS: The title of your talk is very intriguing (Millennials, Motivation, Mission, and Mindfulness: Preventing Infection, circa 2017). What will you be discussing?
SS: Motivating people depends on their own intrinsic characteristics and also the characteristics of their generation. I will be talking about some of the generational characteristics of millennials compared with others and also how to motivate people and change behavior. That includes things like motivational interviewing, as well as using the various senses to guide behavior — so that the right thing to do is the easier thing to do. Mission can be that of the organization or the unit that you are a part of, but it could also be your own personal mission or purpose in healthcare and as an IP. And then I will end with a discussion of mindfulness and how IPs and other healthcare workers can apply mindfulness to not only improve the care that they provide, but also to improve their own well-being.

PS: Can you give us an example of applying mindfulness in the healthcare setting?
SS: What if every time we washed our hands, before touching a patient, we did it mindFULLY, rather than mind-LESSLY — paying attention to what the alcohol-based hand gel feels like, the sensation of it evaporating from our hands, the smell? In so doing, we could also remind ourselves that it is an honor to take care of patients, and that while we may already have seen many patients today, these next 10 minutes — from the patient’s perspective — will be the most important 10 minutes of their day.

PS: As a teacher, how do you get through to your students about infection prevention?
SS: I let students know that when we are caring for patients, we have three goals. Goal number one — and the most important goal — is superb patient care. We are going to treat every veteran as though they are a family member. Many of our patients can’t advocate for themselves. We have to be their advocate because they served this great nation,
and this is our way of thanking them and repaying our
debt. The second thing is that we are going to learn a
ton of medicine. The final goal is to enjoy what we do.
If we are smiling during rounds, that’s a good thing
because people who enjoy what they do perform better.
But superb patient care is first and foremost and will not
be compromised.

PS: How can IPs be more effective in changing
behavior?
SS: IPs should ideally be viewed as coaches, rather than
the IRS or the hand hygiene police, and they need to
be fully aligned with the clinicians in order to do their
jobs. What if IPs could be seen as mindfulness facilita-
tors — reminding people that we are here for patients
who depend on us to keep them free from harm? I will
be touching on these ideas during my talk in Portland.

PS: You seem to love what you do. What keeps
you interested and engaged?
SS: Part of it is my background. I was born in Kenya
and came to the U.S. at age five. I have the mindset of
an immigrant and know how lucky I am to be in this
country. I’m not sure I would have been able to be a
doctor anywhere else.

Being responsible for the care of vulnerable patients,
especially veterans, who are among the most vulnerable,
is a reminder that what we in healthcare are doing is a
true privilege. What other job is more important than
keeping people free from harm and making them feel
better? I can’t imagine anything more fulfilling.

And the best part for me is that not only do I get to see
patients, and teach learners at the University of Michigan,
but I’m able to write papers, do research, and disseminate
the findings through lectures like what I will be doing at
APIC. I get to connect with audiences and help them find
their own voice and see that light bulb go off with an idea
that they will take back and use to help their patients.

To hear Sanjay Saint’s TEDxUofM talk, visit:

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in Portland, Oregon.

Please note: Each recipient is responsible for completing her/his
online conference registration and booking her/his own hotel.

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rently working in the infection prevention arena, focused on
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PLENARY SESSION SPEAKERS

10 Ways to Have Infinitely Better Conversations
Celeste Headlee
Award-winning journalist, author, public speaker, and vocalist

Point/Counterpoint: Discontinuation of Contact Precautions for Clostridium difficile and CHG Bathing
David Banach, MD, MPH and Phil Polgreen, MD, MPH
Barbara DeBaun, RN, MSN, CIC, and Russell Olmsted, MPH, CIC, FAPIC

Millennials, Motivation, Mission, and Mindfulness: Preventing Infection Circa 2017
Sanjay Saint, MD, MPH
Chief of Medicine at VA Ann Arbor and George Dock Professor of Internal Medicine at University of Michigan