A Day in the Life of a VA Neurologist:
Lynn Kataria, MD

When Lynn Kataria, MD, launched herself into medical school and her training as a neurologist, working for the Veteran's Administration was not something she had seriously considered. Although her mother, a VA nurse for 30-some years, had told her it was a great system to work for, Kataria had never felt compelled or pressured to build her own career there. Things changed when she took her residency at Georgetown University Hospital, with rotations in the Washington DC Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC). After spending many months covering the VAMC inpatient ward while also seeing patients in the outpatient neurology clinic, Kataria was sold. Caring for the veterans deepened her interest in sleep disorders while prompting her to pursue related electives during her residency. A sleep fellowship at UNC Chapel Hill gave her even more experience, making her a solid candidate when the VAMC posted an opening in her specialty. Three months after completing her fellowship, Kataria returned to the Washington DC VAMC as attending physician in neurology and sleep medicine. That was in 2010, giving her what she calls “a jam-packed and exciting seven years” in the role.

Appreciating the singularity of VA patients

To some degree, VA neurologists do what neurologists in any patient-centered system do: see and treat patients with neurologic conditions. Kataria notes that the variety of issues is as wide as it would be anywhere, but the issues themselves skew a little differently because of the patient population. “That’s one of the reasons I came here,” she says. “The VA neurology program is tremendous, and it serves the wide range of neurological disorders that affect veterans. I think it’s different in the VA system because of what our vets do and go through.” For example, while the program sees patients needing care for headaches, back pain, and epilepsy as any neurology clinic would, they have particular strengths in issues more prevalent in veterans than in the general population, such as spinal injuries. The Washington DC VAMC also has what Kataria defines as strong clinics for pain, sleep disorders, and multiple sclerosis.

Kataria, who is not from a military family herself, finds that the patient population is one of the draws for her work in the VA medical system. “Working with veterans is really humbling,” she says. “It forces you to listen, and to think about their experiences. They’re coming from a completely different experience than most doctors have even imagined.” For example, Kataria says, “With our veterans going into combat, and working in shifts, and not getting enough sleep in general—that’s almost a setup for having sleep disorders.” Overall, Kataria says there has been a rise in sleep disorders in the VA population of patients, which she was seeing even as a resident. “As we know, sleep apnea and sleep deprivation have broader health consequences. Now there’s also data showing a rising prevalence of sleep disorders. Our primary care providers in the VA are seeing the negative impacts that untreated sleep disorders can have on veterans.”

Enjoying a variety of responsibilities

Kataria splits her time and attention in more than one way. First, as her title indicates, she provides both general neurology care and also specializes for the VA in sleep medicine. Those are the areas of her practice, but the form her work takes can also be divided into clinical, teaching, and research. Although Kataria loves all the areas of her work, she says she was delighted by the research aspect, which she wasn’t expecting. “I came here as a clinician, ready to tackle the caseload,” she says. “I didn’t know I was going to have a career in research as well. That has been really exciting.”

It’s a path that Kataria largely developed herself, having noticed that veterans in her clinical practice with TBI (traumatic brain injury) seemed to have poor compliance with PAP. After conducting a chart review, she was able to give the situation a number—only 19 percent were complying well with their PAP protocols—which gave her the impetus to design a study to delve into the situation more deeply. That was three years ago. In that time, Kataria has won a new investigator grant from her VAMC, which provided the foundation for research
that she conducted and later presented at AAN and American Academy of Sleep Medicine meetings. Now, she has extended her reach to the national VA system by applying for a career development award. If she receives this grant, she’ll be able to go further with her research, and hopefully provide more solutions to serve veterans with sleep disorders.

Kataria finds the teaching aspect of her work to be fulfilling as well. She is both program director of the Sleep Medicine Fellowship at George Washington Hospital, and chief of neurology education for the Washington DC VAMC. In the VA position, she teaches residents and fellows on rotation from four different programs—George Washington University, Howard University, Georgetown University, and the neurology department of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USUHS). She develops the grand rounds series for the year, gives weekly lectures, oversees a weekly sleep case conference given by her sleep fellow, and meets weekly with all her fellows for a sleep didactic. In addition to the structured curriculum both of her teaching roles require, Kataria says she is teaching informally nearly all the time, whether that be on rounds or while treating patients in the clinic. This part of her work was a major factor in her decision to join the VA: “I wanted to be in a setting where there’s a dynamic interplay between attending physicians and students and fellows,” she says. “That’s the setting I wanted to practice in, and that’s definitely the case here.”

Camaraderie supports work-life balance

Other than taking weekend call every few months, Kataria says she is generally able to keep from mixing her home and work lives. “If I do need to do work, I try and attend to it after my kids are asleep.” When asked about work-life balance as the mother of three kids under the age of eight, Kataria is very enthusiastic: “As a woman—and I’m the only woman neurologist in the department—I am incredibly happy. I took two maternity leaves while in this position and had a really welcoming department to cover for me. They were so gracious and kind. There’s a camaraderie among us that’s wonderful. It’s allowed me to be a working mom and still be my best as a physician. It’s not necessarily the easy road, but it’s possible because of my colleagues.”

Could the VA be for you?

Kataria has no plans to leave her VAMC, nor the VA itself. Indeed, she has a bucket list of goals for her work there, including the ability to expand upon her research in sleep disorders and TBI. “I see my future as bright because there are so many opportunities here,” she says. For those considering the VA as an employer, Kataria has this to say: “I would wholeheartedly recommend a career in VA neurology. There is a tremendous need, with open positions across the country, including two in our own department (in headache and pain medicine).” Her advice is for residents and neurology students to take some electives, and for physicians in general to keep an eye open for posted openings, while also reaching out to departments to discuss opportunities. Those who do may find they have the same experience that Kataria reports: patients they love, colleagues who are devoted to their work, and a future that is bright with opportunity.