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Bloomberg researcher named one of Canada’s Rising Stars in Global Health

Grand Challenges Canada has awarded Bloomberg assistant professor LaRon E. Nelson a grant through the Canada Rising Star in Global Health initiative. He is one of only 19 recipients across Canada and will use the award to fund research to help prevent the spread of HIV in sub-Saharan Africa.

Nelson has dedicated his research career to the prevention of HIV and other sexually transmissible infections among socially marginalized groups within African and African Diaspora communities, including teenage parents and men who have sex with men (MSM). This award recognizes his commitment and determination to take on one of the toughest, most worrisome global health issues and to save lives. Nelson’s project, “Kumasi & Accra Project to Prevent AIDS (KAPPA): A social network-based intervention to prevent HIV among men who have sex with men,” is aimed at reducing HIV transmission in Ghana by using social networks to reach men most at risk for infection, yet least visible and among the most difficult to access and engage in HIV prevention services.

“I was very excited to learn that KAPPA was selected to receive funding. It was perfect timing since my colleagues and I were already working on interdisciplinary teams, aggressively trying to identify culturally grounded, multi-level, integrated, evidence-based intervention models to address the intersecting prevention needs of men in African and African Diaspora communities,” says Nelson. “We met with men in Ghana who described multi-level challenges to preventing sexually transmitted infections among men most-at-risk. For the longest time, the condom was the only available biomedical device with prevention efficacy; however, new biomedical advances are expanding our prevention tool kit.”

One of the latest advances, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), involves HIV negative people at high risk for infection taking antiretroviral medication daily to lower their chances of becoming infected with HIV if they are exposed to it. Through this study, Nelson and his team hope to discover the most culturally appropriate strategies for harnessing social/sexual networks to facilitate the uptake of behavioural and biomedical interventions, such as PrEP, within the context of a multi-level prevention strategy for MSM. It’s being developed in collaboration with Ghana’s public health officials and community.

The Canada Rising Star in Global Health program’s goal is to “support the development of exceptional emerging Canadian scientists who have the potential to be world leaders in global health.” Each of the 19 innovators selected from across the country receive a grant of $100,000. Canada is the first country in the world to adopt a grand challenges approach to foreign aid.

If the KAPPA model proves feasible, Nelson will be eligible for additional grant funding to scale-up the intervention in Ghana’s two largest cities: Accra and Kumasi. He would continue working closely with leaders in Ghana to implement the medical and public health policies necessary to evaluate KAPPA’s effectiveness for preventing HIV and its economic feasibility of being locally sustained once the study has concluded.
In addition to a written proposal, Nelson developed a two-minute video presentation of his idea, further demonstrating his creativity and innovation. The video can be viewed on the Grand Challenges Canada website or YouTube.

Grand Challenges Canada is funded by the Government of Canada’s Development Innovation Fund and part of a consortium with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR).

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