

Interview with Samir Sauma, Ph.D., M.P.H.

Director, National Institute on Aging Office of Planning, Analysis, and Evaluation

Interviewed by Kate Nagy for the Stetten Museum on June 8, 2022.

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Kate Nagy: As you know, I'm Kate Nagy and today I'm representing the Stetten Museum at NIH. You are Dr. Samir Sauma, who is the director of the Office of Planning, Analysis, and Evaluation at the National Institute on Aging. It is today June 8, 2022, and just to make sure that you're aware and agree with this being recorded and possibly made public on a public-facing website: Is that okay?

Samir Sauma: Yes.

KN: Excellent! All right, let's get started. I know that you were born in Beirut, and you lived there until you were a teenager.

SS: Yes.

KN: Were your parents scientists?

SS: No, I'm the first scientist in my family.

KN: Yeah, really? What did your mom and dad do?

SS: My father was a businessman, and my mother was a stay-at-home mom.

KN: What sort of business was your father in?

SS: Import/export of food items.

KN: It wasn't even like science-adjacent.

SS: I mean, food science, maybe.

KN: Right, yes. Were you always interested in science?

SS: Yes since I was little.

KN: How did [your interest in science] come about?

SS: Just taking chemistry and biology classes interested me, and I pursued that in undergrad, graduate school, and postdoc.

KN: What was grade school like in Lebanon? Was it very different than it is here?

SS: Yes, it's the French system so it's the Baccalaureate -- as you know, that's pretty intense. I would say it's a little bit more advanced in the high school system there; once you graduate from high school with a Baccalaureate it's almost as if you're on your sophomore year when you apply to college, because you're a year ahead in terms of preparation with the science and the math.

KN: Is that kind of like the International Baccalaureate programs [in American public schools]?

SS: Yeah, it's pretty intense.

KN: When you were in grade school did you go to a private school or a public school?

SS: Yes, a private Jesuit school.

KN: A Jesuit school!

SS: Yes.

KN: Did they offer a lot of science classes?

SS: Yes. The focus is either on science or on literature, and that's the difference in the Baccalaureate: You can have a scientific Baccalaureate or one that's more focused on social science or literature.

KN: And you focused on the science?

SS: Yes.

KN: Did your family encourage your interest in science?

SS: Yes, absolutely. Yeah.

KN: You had five brothers, I believe.

SS: Yes.

KN: And you're the fifth of six [children].

SS: Yes.

KN: And none of them are scientists.

SS: None of them are scientists. There are a couple of engineers, and then three business-oriented.

KN: Did they go into the family business?

SS: Yes, they did.

KN: That's kind of cool! I'll bet you get a lot of Lebanese food...I like Lebanese food. Nobody objected when you became a scientist?

SS: No. It was well regarded, encouraged.

KN: Then you came over here as a teenager. What happened there?

SS: Right. I finished my high school in Nebraska, and then I applied [to college at the University of Nebraska]. I studied chemistry as an undergraduate, then biochemistry in graduate school.

KN: Why did you move to the United States?

SS: Because of the war situation in Lebanon. There was a Civil War, and the schools were closed.

KN: The schools were closed! How old were you?

SS: Sixteen.

KN: Wow. And you came by yourself, I believe.

SS: Yes.

KN: And I think I remember you telling me you had lived an apartment by yourself and attended high school in Nebraska.

SS: Yes, another Catholic school. And yes, I was sixteen and had my own apartment because the high school didn't have a dormitory.

KN: No, it wouldn't have. And this was in Omaha?

SS: Lincoln. University of Nebraska, yes.

KN: And you went to Nebraska because your brother was there?

SS: Yes, and a cousin before that.

KN: Okay, so you had family in the area.

SS: They were around me, yes.

KN: And the high school was aware that you were sixteen years old and living by yourself in an apartment? [Laughter] And did they have a pretty good science program?

SS: Not really. No. I think the University of Nebraska had a pretty good Chemistry Department, and that's why I was interested in that.

KN: How did you choose Nebraska [for your undergraduate degree]?

SS: Because of the cousin who lived there and was studying at the University. I needed to be near someone I knew.

KN: Did you like it?

SS: Yes, it was exciting being in the United States, you know, living the American life that I had only seen in tv shows and movies. I became a football fan because everybody watched the Cornhuskers football games.

KN: In the 1980s, you know, you guys used to routinely demolish my school, [the University of] Kansas.

SS: Yes!

KN: Yeah, I was not a football fan because in Kansas, football is what you do to pass the time until basketball season rolls around...But how did you choose chemistry over biology or genetics or any other [field]?

SS: I think I had more of an interest in chemistry. I like the experimental part of, you know, doing lab experiments, and I think it came easy to me, understanding chemistry.

KN: Did you have any mentors or professors at Nebraska?

SS: Yes. One of the professors became my mentor and I did some undergraduate research in his lab, so he was kind of guiding me through my education.

KN: What was his name?

SS: His last name was Wheeler. I can't remember the first name anymore.

KN: What sort of research were you doing with Dr. Wheeler?

SS: It was probably inorganic chemistry, but that's all I can remember right now.

KN: Then you went on. Did you go straight to a Ph.D., or did you do a master's first?

SS: I did a master's first. That was at Yale.

KN: And is that where your Ph.D. is from as well?

SS: No, I got my Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins.

KN: So you went from Nebraska to Yale to Hopkins. How did you choose Yale?

SS: I wanted to be back on the East Coast because my family was starting to move to the United States and they were on the East Coast, so that was the reason. And it was a good school to go to.

KN: Yeah, obviously! And your master's was in Chemistry?

SS: Yes, physical biochemistry. I would say physical biochemistry.

KN: Tell me about your research there. What did you work on?

SS: It's three decades ago, so I can't remember exactly what my focus area was, because, you know, it was mostly classes. When you get a master's degree, you're not doing that much research -- you're just focusing on taking classes.

KN: But then you went down to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore and by that time your family was pretty much here. Were you married yet when you started -- oh that's right, [marriage] was a more of a post-doc thing. What did you study -- was it more like inorganic chemistry or physical biochemistry at Hopkins?

SS: This was a switch to more pharmacology, so I had a degree in pharmacology from Johns Hopkins.

KN: What did you work on there?

SS: There, it was a focus on parasitology because my mentor was doing parasitology. It was the pharmacology of *Schistosoma mansoni*, which are parasites that are common everywhere except the United States.

KN: Were you working on vermicides?

SS: Yes. Drugs that would treat those parasites.

KN: Did you come up with any patentable discoveries?

SS: No major discoveries, but in order to graduate you have to publish, so I had, I think, three publications in the field.

KN: Were they in specialty journals, or were you publishing in Cell...?

SS: I think they were in, like, Tropical Medicine because of the focus on parasites. [Note: Dr. Sauma's publications on *S. mansoni* appeared in *Molecular and Biochemical Parasitology* and *Parasitology Today*.]

KN: Has anyone picked up your research and run with it and made a million dollars?

SS: I see often, you know, people citing my work and all that.

KN: That must be really exciting.

SS: Yes.

KN: Let's see, and then you did a post-doc in New York.

SS: Right. This was my switch to cancer, and so I found a postdoc -- oh no, sorry. First of all I did a postdoc in industry. I wanted to see what it's like to work in industry, so I did my first postdoc at Merck in New Jersey.

KN: Were you working on parasites –

SS: Immune diseases, and so it was related to what I was doing in graduate school, but with a focus on immunology.

KN: So you and [NIA Director] Richard Hodes have a lot to talk about.

SS: Yes.

KN: You left industry. How come?

SS: I did not enjoy working for industry because the environment was not very stable, because in industry if you don't have a drug that you are working on or that's turning into a product for the company, the lab shuts down or you're immediately changing focus. I didn't like that focus on the dollar, so I decided to do a postdoc in academia. So I went to Sloan Kettering in New York.

KN: Any reason you chose [to focus on] cancer specifically?

SS: It was interesting -- it was in research on colon cancer, and it was the signal transduction, you know, as it related to colon cancer, and I wanted to be at Sloan Kettering because it was one of the bigger research centers in cancer in the area. So, yeah, that's why I went to New York for three years.

KN: And it was around that time that you got married.

SS: Not yet. When I finished my postdoc in cancer research, I saw that there was a Cancer Prevention Fellowship Program at the NCI [National Cancer Institute], so this is when I ended up at NCI. I applied to that program, and I got accepted and then I moved to Bethesda, right after my cancer postdoc.

KN: To work at NCI you would have had to have been a U.S. citizen by that time.

SS: Yes. I got married that summer – the summer of 1997.

KN: When did you make the decision to pursue United States citizenship?

SS: Well, that was a long time coming, because you know if I'm living in the United States, I have to be a citizen.

KN: I mean, there are visas, but yeah.

SS: I switched from a student visa to a resident visa -- like a green card.

KN: Were you naturalized?

SS: Yes.

KN: When was that?

SS: Around 1990 – no, more like 1997.

KN: So that was a big year for you. You became a citizen; you moved to Bethesda; you got married.

SS: Yes.

KN: In your early career, did the fact that you were an immigrant -- did you feel like that made a difference to your experiences here? Were there a lot of immigrants in your program, or was that strange?

SS: No, it wasn't strange, because throughout my career as a graduate student and as a postdoc, everyone around me came from somewhere else. As you know, science is not a very popular field for a lot of folks because it takes five years to get a PhD, and then you need to do a postdoc, so many people choose not to pursue a science career. But a lot of my co-students and people I worked with – they were mostly Asian, so I didn't feel like I was a fish out of water. It felt like it was an international group of students and postdocs.

KN: That must have been pretty exciting, though, meeting all the different nationalities and working with them. I find that's one of the things I really like about living in this area generally is meeting people from all sorts of interesting places. So let's see, how did your work, your postdoc, and your parasites and all of that, how do you feel like that prepared you for your career at NIH?

SS: Because I was focused on cancer research in my academic postdoc, when I applied for the fellowship I was a good candidate to be part of the Cancer Prevention Fellowship Program at NCI, so it was an easy transition because I already had built that knowledge about cancer research, the cancer field, so it was an easy transition. Also, in terms of working for the government, being a fellow at NCI I was almost the equivalent of being a postdoc in academia in terms of -- you are still getting trained in

that field, you're not a permanent employee yet, so you can float around and try different areas, and this is what happened. I started working in a lab at NCI, but then I realized that there's something called "planning, analysis, and evaluation" which piqued my interest. Then I turned that corner, and I left the lab and started working in planning.

KN: Which lab were you working in?

SS: It was in the Cancer Prevention Fellowship Department at NCI. It was colon cancer related, actually.

KN: Were you working with Peter Greenwald?

SS: Yes. Peter Greenwald was the Director [of the NCI Division of Cancer Prevention].

KN: Was he your mentor or supervisor?

SS: No, it was someone under him. It was Elaine...Mohr[??] I can't remember the last name but, it was someone else [who] was working under him in the Cancer Prevention Program.

KN: Were you doing laboratory research or was it more demographic or case control studies?

SS: It was lab work because that was still kind of my expertise, was in lab research, so I was still doing a little bit of that -- until I decided that I wanted to get out of the lab.

KN: Why did you want to get out of the lab?

SS: Because I had discovered planning and evaluation -- this bigger picture in health and public health and so -- oh, I forgot to tell you: As part of the Cancer Prevention Fellowship, NCI sends you to get an MPH, a Master's in Public Health, so before I came to NCI, I spent the year getting my MPH.

KN: That was at Harvard, wasn't it?

SS: Yes.

KN: So you were in Boston. You've lived all over the place in the United States.

SS: Yeah, pretty much a lot of East Coast cities.

KN: A lot of east coast cities and also Lincoln.

SS: Yes, Nebraska!

KN: But your wife didn't like Boston.



SS: It was cold, you know. She just came in from the Mediterranean side of the world where it's warm all year long, so it was not an easy transition weather-wise, but it's probably easier down here. She's enjoying the climate here.

KN: When you finished with the lab did you go straight to Sue Waldrop's office?

SS: Yes, I did, actually. As part of the fellowship program at NCI you can rotate through different offices, so before I got a permanent job with her, I was rotating.

KN: I think I remember that, actually. So what did you do [in Sue Waldrop's office?] I never understood what Sue did. What did you guys do there?

SS: Sue was all about anything that was strategic. I think it was called the Office of Strategic Opportunities -- it was called OSO. One of the things that I worked on is collecting NCI's research resources -- what resources were available to the community, whether they were internal resources or resources for [extramural] researchers in cancer. It was kind of like a tabulation, a collection of all the resources that were available to scientists.

KN: That's very different from working in a lab.

SS: Yes. It was my easy transition into a desk job.

KN: So you became a desk jockey. Do you miss the lab?

SS: No. I mean, I spent -- I would say -- two decades in the lab, so it was enough.

KN: After you finished compiling the research resources, what else did you do?

SS: I think we were involved also in those -- I'm forgetting the name. The -- not the working groups -- for the different cancers --

KN: The PRGs?

SS: The Progress Review Groups, yeah, I was involved with those activities.

KN: Yes, I remember those very well. I was involved with those, too. How long did you work for Sue?

SS: Maybe four years before she retired.

KN: And then what happened? You moved into another branch, or your branch was folded into the Planning Office?

SS: My branch was folded into the Planning Office, into OSPA -- the [NCI] Office of Science Planning and Assessment.

KN: Was there anybody else working with Sue when you were there, or were you an office of one?

SS: No. Don't you remember? Lisa Stevens was one -- she was the University of Maryland student who got a job with us in the office, and then...somebody who works at NIH OD [now], and I'm gonna remember the name in a minute.

KN: And you all rolled over into the OSPA and you worked for -- what was that lady's name?

SS: Yes, Margaret [Ames].

KN: And what did you do there?

SS: Again, more of the PRGs, but then there was also a focus on the strategic planning here, so we developed the strategic plan for NCI. This is the Bypass Budget -- strategic planning activities. I was involved with the Cohort Consortium; it's a consortium of all the cohort studies that are led by NCI. I was involved in planning those meetings of investigators who have cohorts of research. This is also cancer population studies.

KN: And you worked there till about...2014?

SS: Yes, until 2011.

KN: 2011. Oh, right, right.

SS: Yes, and then one day I was having lunch with Kathie Reed, who is the previous Director of the Planning office at NIA, and she asked me if I'd be interested in coming over to NIA because her deputy was leaving.

KN: Yes, Jeannie Borger, who was retiring.

SS: I was ready for a change -- I had been at NCI for 11 years -- and so I transitioned. First, I did a detail for a few months, and then when Jeannie retired I took over her position as a Deputy Director [of the NIA Office of Planning, Analysis, and Evaluation] -- the position that you hold now.

KN: It all comes around, you know! What do you do as planning officer at NIA? I mean I know what you do, but for posterity.

SS: I transitioned from being the Deputy Director in 2011 to the Director of the office in 2014 [upon Kathie Reed's retirement]. As you know, we have four different areas of focus at the Planning Office. We do strategic planning for the Institute; evaluation and portfolio analysis; coding for disease categories and research coding; and then reporting, whether it's to Congress or to NIH OD or to other people who request some summaries or reports or advances in research.

KN: What do you like about your job?

SS: I like that it is an [NIA] OD office, so I get to work with everyone within the Institute. It's broad; it involves all focus areas of NIA, and I get to work across the divisions with different folks -- so this with the Director, at the Director level, or at the division level. This is a complete change from the earlier focus in the lab, working at a bench where I was with myself and [my] microscope, to this broader view of the topic.

KN: What do you consider your greatest achievement at NIA so far?

SS: My greatest achievements at NIA have been all the evaluation activities that we have completed because they have helped the Institute in terms of prioritizing, assessing progress, making decisions about activities or initiatives, so yeah, all these activities have been useful for the Institute.

KN: How would you say that [these evaluation activities] have helped the Institute prioritize or change direction?

SS: It's because we use data -- everything is backed up by data. We collect data, we analyze, we assess, so having this type of serious data-driven analysis and results makes it a valuable tool, and that can guide decision making.

KN: Can you give an example of a time when an analysis supported decision making?

SS: Yes. For example, we did a health disparities portfolio analysis of the past 10 years. We looked at how successful we have been in addressing health disparities and minority health research and the diversity of the workforce, so these are all activities that help the Institute get a grasp on portfolio in research and make decisions. We hired [former NIA Director of Special Populations] Carl Hill as a result of that. Another other important thing that we did was this Inclusion Across the Lifespan, which was a series of workshops that looked at clinical trials and how well are we doing including minorities and diverse populations in our trials, and that has led to a lot of kind of important discoveries in terms of how we are lacking in our inclusion and what we need to do to address that.

KN: How were you able to balance your career with your family life? I know that you and your wife have two daughters who are adults now.

SS: I was lucky because I have a wife who stayed at home with the children, so she relieved that burden off of me, and she was able to support the family, but I was always there whenever needed, you know.

KN: Are your daughters pursuing scientific careers?

SS: Yes, one of them is. She's studying neuroscience and psychology.

KN: Really? Wow. So what is she going to do? Is she going to get a doctorate?

SS: Yeah, she'll go to graduate school. We'll see how far she goes, whether it's a master's or a PhD, but she would like to be an analyst -- kind of a psychoanalyst.

KN: Oh, wow. That's exciting! And then what does your other daughter do?

SS: The other one did communications and actually she minored in health promotion, so that's the part where I influenced both of them to look into the field of health and science.

KN: NIH must have changed a lot since you first came here in the 1990s. What was the biggest change in NIH since you started, would you say?

SS: I worked at NCI first before working at NIA, and NCI remains the largest Institute at NIH, so that hasn't changed. Their portfolio is huge, their budget is large. What has changed is NIA moving up from [being] the smaller Institute -- back when I started in 2011 it was still number 11 maybe out of the 27 -- and then within two or three years after I became the director of the office our budget started doubling and tripling and quadrupling because of the Alzheimer's disease research funds that were being allocated.

KN: Do you think that that's a net positive, or do you wish that you could kind of slow things down a little bit?

SS: Oh, no. There's no need to slow things down. It's a net positive because of the aging of the American population, and this is an issue that has become important for almost everyone, you know. I think it's a big plus.

KN: You know, speaking of Alzheimer's disease, like you said, we've had just enormous sums of money obligated for Alzheimer's disease over the past probably 10 years. How has that changed what you do as a Planning Officer?

SS: What has happened with the increase in the budget is that the Institute has increased in size, so we have been hiring a lot of folks in the divisions of Neuroscience and Behavioral Research that relate to Alzheimer's, so we've increased in size as well as in budget. That means we have more priorities to address. We have now a Bypass Budget document, which is equivalent to the NCI's Bypass Budget -- this is the Alzheimer's one. Almost half of our budget is Alzheimer's disease research, and the other half is [other diseases and conditions related to] aging, so that has changed how NIA is viewed and what is its structure and focus area and the breakdowns.

KN: How is NIA viewed, do you think?

SS: It has grown immensely. It's well respected because we have a director who has been leading the Institute for the last 30 years and he's done a great job, because he has shepherded all that whole increase in the budget and has made NIA a prominent institute at NIH.

KN: What do you think hasn't changed at NIA?

SS: The fact that it remains a small Institute in terms of its culture and the environment. NCI has five – I'd say five thousand employees; NIA intramural has maybe four or five hundred, so even though our budget has increased to become the third largest Institute in funding, the environment hasn't changed. We still feel like a small institute in terms of how everybody knows everyone, everyone works closely with others, and so the environment is not so structured and with many layers in terms of leadership but working across divisions versus within the hierarchy. That hasn't changed.

KN: Where do you see the field of aging going?

SS: I mean, it's the most important field because we're all aging! NIA will always remain a strong Institute because of its focus on aging, and aging goes across all disease areas so it will always be the umbrella under which a lot of other diseases at NIH are being addressed.

KN: When you think back over your career, is there anything you would have done differently?

SS: No. I like that I was open to trying new things, to, you know, changing directions. I'm glad I did that. Otherwise, I would have been stuck in the lab as a bench scientist all of my career. But having decided to try things differently -- switching from parasitology to cancer to aging -- I'm glad I got this whole different perspective on science and health.

KN: Is there anything big left to try, as you have, what, five years left before you are retirement-eligible, or ten years...?

SS: Make sure I help with the transition for the next person who comes in and contribute as much as I can before it's all behind me.

KN: What would you tell someone just starting a career at NIH? What advice would you give?

SS: It's a great place to work. Take advantage of all the opportunities offered by NIH. It's a very collegial environment, so it's an environment that is not cutthroat, but rather collaborative, and people have all one purpose, which is to help improve the health of Americans -- and the whole world actually. So value the place because it is pretty special.