

### Editor's Note

Rosalia Rochon profiles Cal Poly faculty member Dr. Peggy Papathakis and her sincere concern for public health. What aspects of Papathakis's personality does Rochon emphasize in this profile, and how does Rochon use specific events to support her claims about Papathakis? A major focus in this essay is Papathakis's work with HIV-infected mothers and infants. How would the initial focus of the essay shift if Papathakis's HIV work had a more prominent position in the introduction? Consider how Rochon uses her personal feelings as support for Papathakis's influential nature and desire to create change in the world beyond her academic specialization.

## An International Challenge

### Rosalia Rochon

As busy Americans it may be difficult to find the time and energy to open our eyes and look around us. We are so consumed with our own lives and problems we rarely consider the fact that there are people in the world with greater and tougher problems than our own. Thus, we need others to force our eyes open and inform us about what is going on not only locally or nationally but internationally as well. Dr. Papathakis is just the right individual for this task. She is an extremely knowledgeable individual with a Registered Dietician degree, Bachelors degree in Dietetics, Masters in Nutrition, PHD in Nutritional Biology, and she is a Cal Poly Child and Maternal Nutrition professor. She conducts research studies within the United States as well as abroad to contribute as much knowledge as she can to the nutrition field. Through her research, Dr. Papathakis challenges us to expand our knowledge as human beings so we have a better understanding of the world we live in today.

Dr. Papathakis took a risk in expanding her knowledge through international research. Knowledge about HIV is fairly limited, especially concerning women and children's nutritional needs. Therefore, Papathakis worked from the "ground up" in an attempt to contribute what knowledge she could to what is already known about HIV (Papathakis). For two years she conducted her research in a small medical clinic, in a rural South African region, Kabuli Natal. Since "very little is known about the nutritional adequacy and feasibility of the replacement milk options presented in the WHO/UNAIDS/UNICEF guidelines for infants of HIV-infected mothers," Dr. Papathakis aimed to explore the "suitability of the 2001 feeding recommendations for infants of HIV-infected mothers" (164).

Researching abroad for two years in a third-world country was a huge step outside her comfort zone. Not only did she have little prior knowledge to base her studies, she also had to learn to live in a completely different country. Papathakis had to adjust to the high crime rate in South Africa by constantly using safety precautions such as never carrying cash or going out past sundown and always locking the gates to her house or the medical clinic. She made the difficult decision in leaving her family and friends behind while she conducted her research in Africa. However, Papathakis was able to adjust to a different culture and style of living because of her passion and love for scientific research. Although she possesses a strong thirst and passion for knowledge, she could not have successfully completed her research without the help of others.

By researching abroad Dr. Papathakis obtained a greater understanding of HIV's nutritional effects on women and their infants. Her coworkers soon became her mentors and family. The people she worked with were "amazing" and "so knowledgeable" (Papathakis). While she understood nutritional aspects of HIV from an academic and scientific perspective, her coworkers offered knowledge from their experiences with living with HIV-infected persons. Unified by their desire to contribute more knowledge to the little already known, Papathakis and her coworkers constantly grew closer to each other, creating a close-knit family. Working together, she and her coworkers' hard work was rewarded with a positive response from public health policies.

Dr. Papathakis stimulated change within the nutrition field by publishing her research paper "Are WHO/UNAIDS/UNICEF-recommended replacement milks for infants of HIV-infected mothers appropriate in the South African context?" (164). Through her research, Papathakis revealed that replacement breast milks do not provide enough nutrients for South African infants. Thus, these replacement milks need revisions. Although it took two more years for her to publish her discoveries, her efforts were well worth her time because the experience was not only "rich," but "way beyond expectations" (Papathakis). She welcomed the constructive criticism and analytical advice from peer reviewers because she wanted her research to be as correct and accurate as possible. After her publication, WHO/UNAIDS/UNICEF changed their replacement breast milk recommendations based on Dr. Papathakis's discoveries. This incredible change in public health policies caused a change in replacement milk formulas (Papathakis). Although it would be easy for her to pat herself on the back for a job well done, she is still contributing information to the nutrition field through her research today.

Researching is a continuous process because there is always something new to learn. Scientists may hold a good deal of knowledge about the causes, symptoms, and treatments of various diseases, yet new information is discovered when looking at

these problems from a nutritional perspective. Before Dr. Papathakis published her research on the nutritional needs of HIV infected women and their infants in 2004, she researched nutrition's effects on those with tuberculosis. After her 2004 publication she conducted a research study on how nutrition plays a role in the body composition of children with Bells Palsy and Kidney Transplants. Now she is working on organizing a Cal Poly student research group to study the nutritional status of Cocoa farmers in Ghana and the Ivory Coast in West Africa. Through her research and publications Papathakis challenges her readers to learn more about our world and seek out the answers one does not know.

Dr. Papathakis uses her international studies to encourage others to be informed individuals. Being an informed individual does not stop at the local or national level yet continues onto the international level as well. Locally, residents need to understand what challenges their community is struggling with and what they can do to help resolve the situation. Nationally, a citizen needs to be aware of what conflicts his or her country is dealing with both politically and economically. This knowledge is crucial for citizens to make changes within their community or country through voting and bringing controversial issues to leaders' attention. As Americans we do pretty well in informing citizens about local and national issues such as energy conservation in California and about the personal lives of our presidential candidates for upcoming elections. However, when it comes to international issues, Americans are not as knowledgeable as we should be. Papathakis is "ashamed that the US never reads about Africa" (Papathakis). While news concerning America and other nations often make front page headlines in Africa, our newspapers rarely reserve the front page for international news. She wishes America would follow Africa's example in informing the public with "very diverse news" (Papathakis). As a nation, we need to work on informing our citizens about international issues so we are aware of what issues other nations are battling. However, we should not leave this task to the researchers and newscasters alone, but we need to take the time and responsibility to inform ourselves.

In our modern world of technology and diverse forms of communication, there is no reason for us to remain uninformed individuals. We have access to daily newspapers, radio and television broadcasts, as well as the Internet. Papathakis stays connected to the international world of nutrition through daily electronic newsletters. Granted, she does not have enough time to read every single article from top to bottom, however, she skims through the headlines and chooses to read those articles that catch her attention, in further detail. After speaking with Dr. Papathakis and listening to her international research experiences, I have become inspired to make a more conscious effort in being an informed individual. I do not want to be ignorant

by staying wrapped up in my own life, but would like to know what is happening in the world around me. In order to expand my knowledge, I can read the newspapers offered here at school or sign up for electronic newsletters concerning national or international news. I could even go visit a foreign country by studying abroad or participating in Dr. Papathakis's research study in West Africa next summer. There are plenty of ways for Americans and myself to become more informed about national and international issues, we just have to make an effort to pursue them.

Dr. Papathakis challenges others to try to make the world a better place by finding a problem and trying to help resolve that problem. She saw a need for more scientific information in the field of HIV and its effects on women. Thus, she set out to contribute new discoveries through her research. By stepping outside her comfort zone and choosing to do her research in Africa, Papathakis challenges others to think about international issues. She focuses on a third-world country such as Africa, because Americans rarely hear about these countries' struggles or successes. Since America has so many resources and the potential to share its abundance with others, we need to be informed about what is going on internationally so we can lend a hand to those countries in need.

### Works Cited

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Papathakis, Peggy, and N.C. Rollins. "Are WHO/UNAIDS/UNICEF-recommended replacement milks for infants of HIV-infected mothers appropriate in the South African context?" *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* Mar. 2004: 164–171.

*Rosalia Rochon is a nutrition major.*