

# VOICES

The newsletter of the Cancer Epidemiology Education in Special Populations (CEESP) program • Fall 2023



The 2023 CEESP cohort gathered in New York City in August for CEESP's annual post-summer career development workshop.

## Frequent Flyer



This past summer, I traveled to CEESP training sites in four continents—Africa, Europe, South America, and North America. I made two visits alone to one of our newest partners, Romania, where CEESP is teaming up with

researchers in three cities (Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, and Iași) to better understand and address the epidemiologic transition Romania is undergoing. I also spent time in Luxor, Egypt, another new CEESP training site. And in Tanzania, I traveled 600 miles northwest of Dar Es Salaam to the city of Mwanza, where I checked in on an enterprising CEESP student Bhaavna Peri who was studying data from a promising new cancer registry that will be an important resource for future CEESP students.

People often ask me “how I do it.” I tell them, “I enjoy my work.” Travel is exhausting, of course, but it’s crucial

to encouraging students, developing new CEESP sites, and creating opportunities for future students. Since our founding in 2006—when we had sites in only two regions, Africa and the Middle East—CEESP has expanded into five continents and more than 25 nations. It’s been immensely gratifying to see the impact of our work, not only on new generations of cancer epidemiologists but on the health and well-being of people around the world.

Our impact happens in three primary ways. First, CEESP students and their on-site collaborators document real-life situations through building research infrastructure, performing epidemiologic and cancer prevention research, and publication. Second, scientifically rigorous information generated by CEESP students helps leaders in our partner institutions by documenting the reality of their situation and by helping persuade policymakers to invest the necessary resources to address that

situation. Third, CEESP findings alert community leaders and advocates to the risk and prevalence of cancer in their communities, and helps them identify culturally appropriate ways of increasing screening and early detection, promoting cancer awareness and literacy, and improving overall quality of care.

One of the questions raised by reviewers during our most recent grant application was how does CEESP benefit local communities? As you’ll see in this issue of *Voices*, we do so in many ways—not the least of them by growing our presence worldwide, helping to build strong infrastructures in our partner sites, and furthering global understanding of cancer incidence, risk factors, screening and treatment options. ■

**Amr S. Soliman, MD, PhD**  
*CEESP Program Director*

## About the Program

The Cancer Epidemiology Education in Special Populations (CEESP) Program includes a four-month summer field research experience in foreign countries and among minority populations in the United States. CEESP faculty and field collaborators have the experience to provide expert field mentorship, with the aim of training participants to implement studies in ethnically diverse settings. Since its founding in 2006, CEESP has trained over 200 students who are now pursuing careers around the world.

## Apply for 2024

**Application Deadline: January 28, 2024**

CEESP is accepting applications for the summer of 2024. Open to MPH and first-year PhD students in public health, this unique, fully funded research training program provides critical field research experience in over 20 countries, including the United States.

For more information or to apply visit <http://ceesp.cuny.cuny.edu>

## VOICES

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Send comments to [asoliman@med.cuny.edu](mailto:asoliman@med.cuny.edu). Select features from Voices are available online at [ceesp.cuny.cuny.edu](http://ceesp.cuny.cuny.edu) ©2023.

## TRAINING SITE PROFILE

# A Country in Transition

In the summer of 2020—early in the pandemic—CEESP Director Amr Soliman reached out virtually to colleagues in Romania, and a new CEESP partnership was born. Three years later, CEESP has a robust training site for students in Bucharest and is developing new sites in the Romanian cities of Cluj-Napoca and Iași.

“It’s such an interesting country,” Soliman says. A middle-income eastern European nation with a fast-growing economy and health system, Romania is a member of the European Union (since 2007) but in other ways is still emerging from its 45-year occupation by the Soviet Union. In terms of lifestyle, Romania is “very much in transition,” Soliman notes, “with high rates of smoking and other environmental exposures, low rates of early diagnosis, and just the beginnings of a vigorous cancer-prevention and screening system.” The need for high-quality cancer registries is also great. And until recently, low physician salaries were another challenge—driving many oncologists and other specialists to leave the country in search of higher wages. Happily, the Romanian government is now addressing the problem.

The three most prevalent cancers in Romania—lung, breast, and cervical—are largely preventable. So it’s a matter of raising awareness, boosting prevention and early



Over 1.7 million Romanians live in the capital city of Bucharest

diagnosis, and introducing new policies and resources to lower mortality and morbidity from these cancers. That’s what CEESP trainees are aiming to do, in collaboration with partners like Silviu Radulescu, a senior public health and management specialist physician at the National Institute of Public Health in Bucharest. To date, a handful of CEESP students have trained in Romania, and Soliman is keen for more to follow. “A number of Romanian officials in significant leadership positions have given their blessing to CEESP, including several vice-presidents of academic institutions and the director of cancer prevention and control at the National Institute of Public Health,” he says. “So I’m very excited about our prospects.” ■

## New@ CEESP

### CEESP’s Award-Winning Students

At this year’s International Cancer Education Conference, held in Toronto,



Named for and funded by **Yuthar Al Rawahi**, founder and chair of the National

Association for Cancer Awareness in Oman, the annual award honors the CEESP student whose presentation at the conference earns the highest score from a panel of CEESP faculty, mentors, and graduates. Award criteria include the overall quality of the student’s presentation, methodology, study design, scientific background, and plans for future research and career planning in cancer-related fields. Yuthar Al Rawahi and her husband, Dr. Wahid Al Kharusi, have been strategic CEESP partners and mentors since 2015.

Second- and third-place winners will also receive awards, thanks to the generosity of CEESP alumna **An Nguyen** (Egypt, 2018), who funded the awards in the belief that all three

top students should be honored for their work. “I was a grad student, so I know every dollar counts!” she



remembers. An analyst for the U.S. Department of Defense and director of global health education and research for the consulting firm Alexa Research and Engineering, Nguyen has been a CEESP mentor since 2019. “It’s my passion to give back by helping to educate the next generation of global health and public health students,” she says. “I keep telling CEESP students to look for opportunities to give back!” ■

## MENTOR PROFILE

# Data Is Critical

**Silviu Radulescu** is a senior public health and management specialist physician at the National Center for Statistics in Public Health in Romania’s National Institute of Public Health in



Bucharest. He trained in both Bucharest and London and has worked in Washington, D.C. He teamed up with CEESP in 2020 and has since mentored several CEESP

students in Romania. A self-described fanatic when it comes to data collection, management, and analysis, Radulescu says, “I used to be called Woody Woodpecker when I was young.” Radulescu spoke to Voices in August about the CEESP collaboration.

**Q: What’s changed in Romania since 1989?**

**Radulescu:** Some regions have improved over the past 20 years, some have plateaued, and in Bucharest you have a paradox, where there are differences in incidence and differences in treatment—two key areas we want to explore further. As in many other countries, we’re in the midst

of an epidemiological transition in Romania, where because people die younger from cardiovascular diseases, cancer rates are lower. Those lower rates are due, in part, I think, to lower diagnostic rates. My assumption is that we were missing some cancers. But we’re beginning to make progress, and our collaboration with CEESP is very helpful on that front.

**“Thanks to our work with CEESP students to date, we’ve been able to get a much clearer picture of cancer trends in different parts of Romania.”**

**Q: What does your new partnership with CEESP mean to you?**

**Radulescu:** What drew me to CEESP was the possibility to have public health students identify and analyze Romanian data. It’s an opportunity to have a research assistant for a dedicated period of time—an additional brain, basically. CEESP brings a structured program,

resources, and the very attractive possibility of publishing in peer-reviewed journals with wide exposure. Thanks to our work with CEESP students to date, we’ve been able to firm up demographic and health data, compare and evaluate data sources, and get a much clearer picture of cancer trends in different parts of Romania.

**Q: What are your hopes for Romania going forward?**

**Radulescu:** I’m interested in evidence-based policy—that’s my dream. How to determine the most appropriate use of public investment by looking at the data, how to deploy resources strategically. The most important thing now is that we have captured the attention of decisionmakers in universities. In general, we can learn a lot from other parts of the world. In a country like Romania, we can’t replicate what France and Germany do with lots of money, but we have the potential to learn from places like the Middle East and other parts of Europe who know how to work with scarce resources. ■

## STUDENT PROFILE

# In the Field: Necessary Adjustments

Having grown up in China and completed high school in Serbia, current Yale MPH student **Rachel Wang** is no stranger to international settings. It’s why she wanted to spend the summer in Romania working on two different CEESP



research projects. One, a continuation of work begun in 2022 by then-CEESP student Jack Carew, is an attempt to understand the incidence pattern of disparities between rural and urban mortality in breast cancer.

The second study, launched midway through her training period in Bucharest because of difficulties in securing data, is a consideration of risk factors for breast cancer mortality in Romania, including the number of hospital beds and physicians. An additional

challenge will be to analyze the quality of data collected during the Covid years, when incidence rates in Romania dropped to unusually low levels. Wang hopes to publish two manuscripts from these studies.

What lessons has she learned to date? “First, flexibility. I know people tell you that things don’t always go the way you expect they will, but you actually have to experience that!” She also learned how to interact with different people and to adapt to approaches to time. Her model in this is CEESP Director Amr Soliman. Among other things, Wang says, Soliman is a whiz at adjusting to time differences—“both literal time zones and culturally different approaches to time. And he does it in a very short period of time. He’s going to be my role model when I enter this field!” ■

## MENTOR PROFILE

## Egypt's Emad Shash

Prior to the opening of Shefaa Al-Orman Hospital (SOH) in Luxor—the first comprehensive cancer treatment center in upper Egypt—countless Egyptians had to travel long distances for cancer care. For most of the nearly one million inhabitants of this southern, largely rural region, Cairo—12 hours away by car—was the nearest site for routine procedures like screenings and treatment.



All of that changed in 2016, says physician and CEESP mentor **Emad Shash** of the National Cancer Institute at Cairo University, who oversees different aspects of the health care system in Egypt. With new outpatient clinics, radiotherapy facilities, and a new pediatric oncology wing, the Luxor center addresses the vast need for cancer care in upper Egypt. SOH now has 14,000 registered patients, with an additional 27,000 receiving treatment. No one is turned away—making SOH a literal lifesaver



Shefaa Al-Orman Hospital

for Egyptians of every socioeconomic class—and thanks to Egypt's increasingly expanding universal health care insurance system, more and more people in the region have access to care.

SOH also serves as a training center for physicians, nurses, and pharmacists, and as an educational center for the wider public. CEESP is an important part of teaching and research at SOH, and Shash says he looks forward to continuing the collaboration. This summer he mentored two students, Doris Chiu, who

researched colorectal cancer, and Melissa Huestis, who focused on breast cancer. Working with CEESP, Shash says, is a way of thinking “out of the box to get solutions for the problems we face.” Cancer epidemiology is different from basic epidemiology, and students like Chiu and Huestis, he notes, “clearly know how to dig into the data and how to make the statistical tabulations and calculations to get us the information we need.” CEESP is furthermore helping Shash and his colleagues build a robust cancer registry in upper Egypt and forge ties with other facilities in the region.

For the CEESP students themselves, Shash observes, the summer training program provides a rich learning activity. “When you speak to a person from a different culture, who has a different point of view, you learn from this.” But it's a two-way street. “I learn from my students too. They come with new information that I don't have. So it's a learning process for me, for my students, for everyone.” ■

## STUDENT PROFILE

## “Incredible Work Is Being Done”



An MPH student in epidemiology and biostatistics at the CUNY School of Public Health, **Doris Chiu** specifically wanted to study colorectal cancer in southern Egypt, where rates of early-onset colorectal cancer are notably high in people under 40. “It's a unique age distribution,” Chiu says, although she adds that early-onset rates are also increasing in countries like the United States. “Questions remain as to why this is happening.”

Because most prior research on this type of cancer in Egypt was based on data sources in northern Egypt, the existence of Shefaa Al-Orman Hospital offers new opportunities for tracking the incidence and age distribution of cancers.

As a 2023 CEESP student, Chiu used data from 2018 to 2022 to assess colon and rectal cancer rates for two administrative boundaries in upper Egypt: Luxor and Qena. Together, Luxor

**“I'm also excited just to have more up-to-date information about southern Egypt to add to the literature.”**

and Qena comprise the majority of cases seen at SOH. Chiu also looked at colorectal cancer rates from smaller providers in the region, “so we're confident that we're looking at population-based data rather than just hospital data.” “While there's a difference between northern and southern Egypt,” Chiu says, “we're anticipating finding similar results about age distribution here as compared to there. But I'm also excited just to have more up-to-date information about southern Egypt to add to the literature, to possibly improve screening and treatment.” She finds the overall spirit at SOH especially inspiring. And CEESP, she notes, “is one more avenue through which to uplift the incredible work that's being done.” ■

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