

## Healthy Look at Consumer Behavior

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Tulane marketing experts and physicians are collaborating in a series of studies that may provide insights on how to better motivate patients to follow their doctors' orders.



Mita Sujan, center, and Harish Sujan, left, of the A. B. Freeman School of Business, have teamed up with Dr. Timothy Harlan, right, a.k.a. Dr. Gourmet, to use consumer psychology in ways to motivate patients toward healthier lifestyles. (Photo by Tricia Travis)

Dr. Timothy Harlan, assistant clinical professor of medicine, and marketing professors Mita Sujan and Harish Sujan of the A. B. Freeman School of Business joined forces for the research.

"The project is to try to use principles from consumer psychology to help doctors get their patients to adhere better to their recommendations for a healthy lifestyle," says [Mita Sujan](#), Malcolm Woldenberg Professor of Marketing and Consumer Behavior.

The team focused on a number of Harlan's patients with chronic illnesses such as diabetes and hypertension, developing a questionnaire for patients to fill out.

"The key is really in how the doctor frames his message," says Harlan. "The survey is designed to give doctors an understanding of what kind of message a patient might be prepared to respond to."

The team is analyzing patient-physician interactions, trying to isolate best practices, according to Harlan, who also is known as [Dr. Gourmet](#).

"We also have run controlled lab experiments with undergraduate students," says Mita Sujan. "We measured their profiles in terms of consideration of future consequences. Using pedometers, we were able to measure if they would walk more or less, depending on what we promised them. For example, for some students we would say walking increases bone health and prevents osteoporosis, a long-term benefit; or we would say: walking will trim your figure, and you will feel more energetic, and that's very present-oriented."

Adds Sujan, "People respond very differently to promotion versus prevention messages. I think that's the main idea ? to measure individual differences between patients, just like we do with consumers, and then tailor physician messages."