PUBLIC HEALTH
TEXAS A&M HEALTH SCIENCE CENTER

2014
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Rae Lynn Mitchell, M.A.
Communications Director
Editor
Laura J. Clanton, M.A.
Communications Coordinator
Stephen Arnold
Digital Media Specialist
Gabriel Chmielewski
Contributing Photographer

HAVE AN UPDATE?
Your classmates want to hear about you! Help us share your news of a new job, promotion, recognition, marriage, birth of a child, etc. Send items (and photos) to: rlmitchell@sph.tamhsc.edu

TAMU MS 1266
College Station, TX 77843
www.sph.tamhsc.edu
“Howdy” is the official greeting at Texas A&M University, and as new members of that family, it seems an appropriate way to begin with that. This has been a year of many changes. The Texas A&M Health Science Center merged into Texas A&M University and we dropped “rural” from our School’s name to become the Texas A&M Health Science Center School of Public Health. The name change was initiated by our faculty recognizing our increasingly broad role in promoting state and national health. We have added a B.S.P.H., our first undergraduate degree program in both College Station and in South Texas at our McAllen campus. We also have new M.P.H. programs and an Executive M.H.A. program starting next year.

Established by the Texas Legislature in 1998 and with a first graduating class in 2000, Ciro Sumaya, M.D., M.P.H., T.M., was our founding dean. Dr. Sumaya retires from our faculty this year and before saying anything else, I want to acknowledge his leadership and contributions.

As the fourth dean (interim), it has been my honor and pleasure to help facilitate the transitions mentioned above. While it is tempting to answer my grandson’s question about “what do you do at work?” with “go to meetings,” a more heartfelt answer would be that I have the great opportunity to watch students discover how they can channel their passion to serve in this unique field we call public health, to encourage new faculty to think big and take risks and then to help them find resources they need to implement those big ideas, and to work with health care professionals and community and university leaders who each play a meaningful role in improving population health.

I share these experiences with a remarkable faculty whose commitment to our mission is very personal. We have six Regents Professors and two Distinguished Professors among them, a far higher proportion than many other colleges in the university. Another important characteristic of our faculty are their extensive relationships outside the school with others on the Texas A&M campus as well as regional, state, national and international partners. As just one example, the CDC of Nigeria has been instrumental in helping to establish a program whereby students from their country are fully sponsored to enroll in our masters and doctoral programs.

The following pages include articles describing in greater detail more of the aspects of what our school – its faculty, staff and students – are doing to promote population health. I hope you are encouraged by what you read. This is an exciting time for us, and I appreciate the opportunity of sharing my enthusiasm with you.

James N. Burdine, Dr.P.H.
Interim Dean, School of Public Health
Texas A&M Health Science Center

Highlights from new five-year strategic plan:
By 2018 we will -

- Double the size of student body and faculty
- Develop a center for translation of evidence-based health promotion research into practice
- Develop a nationally recognized pain initiative addressing community solutions to prevention and management of chronic pain
- Develop a program around the application of technology such as personal health technology (e.g., wearable monitors), remote health assessment and telehealth
- Develop programs for emerging infectious diseases and vaccine-related initiatives
- Expand our expertise and technical capacity in environmental and occupational health through linkages with the private sector
Six Regents Professors in Six Years

Six faculty have received the prestigious Regents Professor Award. Not bad considering that only 179 faculty members from universities and agencies across the A&M System have been recognized with the award.

Established in 1996, the Regents Professor Award is bestowed annually by The Texas A&M University System Board of Regents in recognition of awardees’ exemplary contributions to their university or agency and to the people of Texas.

Of special interest is that two of the Regents Professors, Catherine Hawes, Ph.D., and Charles Phillips, Ph.D., M.P.H., are not only partners in research, but in married life. Also, two others, Marcia Ory, Ph.D., M.P.H., and Kenneth McLeroy, Ph.D., have been designated as Distinguished Professors.

Catherine Hawes, Ph.D., is an internationally recognized expert in long-term care with particular attention to quality of care. Her numerous awards and accolades are testament to her devotion to the quality of care for the elderly and infirm. She also led a team of researchers who developed an assessment system used in all U.S. nursing homes to develop resident’s care plans and evaluate the quality of care. This tool has been translated into 22 languages and is now used in 19 other countries.

Charles Phillips, Ph.D., is a gerontologist and public health professional specializing in long-term care policy and health services research. He also has a particular interest in measuring and evaluating quality of care and quality of life in care settings providing long-term care to the frail elderly and disabled.

Both Hawes and Phillips received the Public Service Award from the National Citizens’ Coalition for Nursing Reform and served for many years on the editorial board of The Gerontologist. They have also been recognized by the Institute for Scientific Information as leading scholars in their fields, among the top one-half of one percent of all published researchers worldwide in each of 21 categories “who have demonstrated great influence in their field” and “made fundamental contributions to the advancement of science” as measured by citations to their work.

Hawes receives Award for Lifetime Achievement in Long-term Care Reform

Regents Professor Catherine M. Hawes, Ph.D., received the 2013 Elma Holder Founder’s Award from the National Consumer Voice for Quality Long-Term Care at their 37th Annual Conference and Meeting, in Crystal City, Virginia.

The Elma Holder Founder’s Award is a lifetime achievement award to honor a person whose life work exemplifies leadership in the field of long-term care reform and is named in honor of the Consumer Voice’s founder.

Hawes’ has spent her entire career in teaching, research, and activism in pursuit of person-centered quality in long-term services and supports. It is this continual dedication to the needs of vulnerable populations that earned her this prestigious award.

The Consumer Voice, previously the National Citizens’ Coalition for Nursing Home Reform (NCCNHR), is the foremost national authority for consumers of long-term services and support, whether in nursing homes, assisted living, or in their own homes. It is comprised of 200 member organizations (AARP, the Alzheimer’s Association, etc.) and several thousand members.

Also, this past year Hawes was in the PBS FRONTLINE documentary, “Life and Death in Assisted Living,” to discuss her groundbreaking research on assisted living facilities across the nation. Once thought to be safe places where individuals with mild impairments could live out the remainder of their lives, Hawes’ research highlights a variety of issues with assisted living facilities due to the lack of federal standards. The documentary may be viewed using the QR code below or at pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/life-and-death-in-assisted-living/
Marcia Ory, Ph.D. is one of two Regents Professors who also hold the designation of Distinguished Professor. Ory is an international leader in healthy aging, community-based prevention and wellness research. She has made substantial contributions to identifying factors associated with healthy aging as well as implementing and disseminating evidence-based programs for improving the health and functioning of older adults. Working collaboratively with a variety of communities, state and national partners, she has advanced the science of public health translational research. She is also known for her excellence in mentoring the next generation of scholars and practitioners. She has authored or co-authored more than 10 edited books and 275 peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters. Additionally, she has generated more than $1 million annually in expenditures for research and service. She was awarded at the Association of Schools of Public Health's 70th annual meeting the Phillip G. Weiler Award for Leadership in Aging and Public Health. She also received the Texas A&M Health Science Center's Presidential Award in Research selected for this honor from nominees from the colleges of medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, and nursing.

K.C. Donnelly, Ph.D., had more than 30 years of experience in basic and applied research when he passed away in 2009. He served as the associate director for the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences-funded Superfund Basic Research Program at Texas A&M University. His research included environmental exposure studies in various locations around the world and numerous U.S. locations, along with animal and human population studies on pollution exposures and the genotoxicity of complex chemical mixtures. He worked to improve the public health work force by implementing continuing education workshops in environmental health for public health professionals.

Additional research efforts included a collaborative study with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Environmental Protection Agency to conduct a study on pesticide exposure in children residing in four rural communities and studies on the use of health education as an intervention to reduce childhood exposure to pesticides in the Texas colonias.

Dr. Donnelly worked to improve the public health work force by implementing continuing education workshops in environmental health.

Marcia Ory, Ph.D.

Kenneth McLeroy, Ph.D. is the second Regents Professor to hold the Distinguished Professor title as well. He has been chair of the editorial board for the American Journal of Public Health (AJPH), editor of the AJPH Department of Framing Health Matters, Samuel Roberts Noble Foundation Presidential Professor at the University of Oklahoma, Research Laureate for the American Academy of Health Behavior, Outstanding Alumni at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Graduate School, co-chair of the Association of Schools of Public Health Behavioral and Social Science workgroup for the Masters in Public Health core competencies, and a member of numerous peer reviews and federal and state grant review committees. He has written extensively on the use of social ecology as a framework for public health research and practice, and social ecological concepts are widely used in the core competencies for the public health certification examination and an essential element of public health theory and practice. Most recently he has been invited to serve a three-year appointment on the Public, Community and Population Health Grants Committee by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services appointee of the National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services, and a four-year term on the National Advisory Committee of Environmental Health Sciences-funded Superfund Research Program at Texas A&M University. His research included environmental exposure studies in various locations around the world and numerous U.S. locations, along with animal and human population studies on pollution exposures and the genotoxicity of complex chemical mixtures. He worked to improve the public health work force by implementing continuing education workshops in environmental health for public health professionals.

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Keneth McLeroy, Ph.D.

Larry Gamm, Ph.D. developed and directed the multi-university National Science Foundation (NSF)-funded Center for Health Organization Transformation (CHOT). His research and teaching focuses on health care management and improvement, with research primarily on electronic medical records, chronic disease management and rural health. He directed the development and publication of the widely used “Rural Healthy People 2010,” which addresses rural health conditions and rural health care workforce challenges. He built the school’s nationally regarded Master of Health Administration (M.H.A.) program that was selected as one of 10 leading M.H.A. programs to advance leadership competencies. He currently is serving a four-year term on the National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services which addresses rural health conditions and rural health care workforce challenges.

Larry Gamm, Ph.D.

Dr. McLeroy is an international leader in the use of social ecology as a framework for public health research and practice.

Dr. McLeroy

Dr. Ory is an international leader in healthy aging, community-based prevention and wellness research.

Marcia Ory

Marcia Ory

Dr. Donnelly

Dr. Donnelly

Larry Gamm

Larry Gamm

Dr. Gamm built the school’s nationally regarded Master of Health Administration (M.H.A.) program.
Birth Defects – Could the Cause be in the Water?

Identifying the cause of birth defects has been a heart-wrenching question for every parent who has a child born with one. It has been a research focus for almost 30 years of Jean Brender, Ph.D., RN, associate dean for research and a professor in the department of epidemiology and biostatistics.

Most recently Dr. Brender’s research has focused on maternal exposures to nitrates, nitrites, and nitrosatable drugs and birth defects as well as maternal residential proximity to industrial emissions and adverse pregnancy outcomes.

A recent study of mothers and their exposures during the first trimester of pregnancy suggest that higher nitrate intake from drinking water sources might be associated with some types of defects in babies. Published in Environmental Health Perspectives, the study took place in Iowa and Texas. Brender and Pete Weyer, Ph.D., associate director of the University of Iowa Center for Health Effects of Environmental Contamination, used data from participants of the National Birth Defects Prevention Study and linked mothers’ addresses to their drinking water sources and respective nitrate measurements. They assigned nitrate levels for bottled water from collection of representative samples and standard laboratory testing. Nitrate levels in drinking water of private well users were estimated through complex modeling of environmental conditions (Texas only). Daily nitrate consumption was estimated from self-reported water consumption at home and work.

Private wells in agricultural areas are the most likely to have higher nitrate levels. Municipal water is tested regularly as required by law. Brender advises women who use well water “to have the water tested to confirm or consider switching to bottled water or water that has been filtered using the process of reverse osmosis.” Women whose drinking water source is from a private well should consult with their local health department to determine where they might have their water tested or call the federal Safe Drinking Water Hotline at 800-426-4791.

“With what we found is that women who gave birth to babies with some types of birth defects tended to consume higher amounts of nitrate from drinking water on a daily basis than women who gave birth to babies without major birth defects,” said Brender. Daily intake of nitrate from drinking water was estimated from nitrate content in drinking water sources and from reported amounts of water consumed during the first trimester.

With data from the National Birth Defects Prevention Study, researchers linked addresses of 3,300 case-mothers (who delivered babies with major birth defects) and 1,121 control-mothers (who delivered babies without major birth defects) from the Iowa and Texas sites to public water supplies and respective nitrate measurements. They assigned nitrate levels for bottled water from collection of representative samples and standard laboratory testing. Nitrate levels in drinking water of private well users were estimated through complex modeling of environmental conditions (Texas only). Daily nitrate consumption was estimated from self-reported water consumption at home and work.

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Jean Brender, Ph.D., RN

Dr. Brender has been appointed to the National Research Council Committee on Analysis of Cancer Risks in Populations near Nuclear Facilities: Phase 2 Pilot Planning.

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (U.S. NRC) requested that the National Research Council within The National Academies provide an assessment of cancer risks in populations near U.S. NRC-licensed nuclear facilities. The 10-member committee, of which Brender is a member, is providing advice regarding the design and implementation of two pilot studies around seven U.S. nuclear facilities including an ecologic study of multiple cancer types of populations and a record-linkage-based case-control study of cancers in children.

She recently delivered the keynote address on nitrogen and health at the 6th International Nitrogen Conference held in Kampala, Uganda. The biannual conference drew scientists from around the world from many disciplines that conduct research and/or work with issues related to nitrogen. The overall goal of the International Nitrogen Initiative is to optimize nitrogen’s beneficial role in sustainable food production and minimize nitrogen’s negative effects on human health and the environment resulting from food and energy production.
A recent study shows alarming rates of child hunger among children of Mexican immigrants. The Program for Research and Outreach-Engagement on Nutrition and Health Disparities identified economic and family factors that increased the odds for child hunger as well as community strategies that reduced the odds among Mexican-origin families who reside in Texas border colonias.

The study is a reminder of the challenge ahead in the fight against childhood hunger in colonias. A recent study shows alarming rates of child hunger among children of Mexican immigrants. The Program for Research and Outreach-Engagement on Nutrition and Health Disparities identified economic and family factors that increased the odds for child hunger as well as community strategies that reduced the odds among Mexican-origin families who reside in Texas border colonias.

The study lead by Joseph Sharkey, Ph.D., M.P.H., RD, professor and founding director of the program, used 2009 Colonia Household and Community Food Resource Assessment (C-HCFRA) data from 470 mothers who were randomly recruited by promotora-researchers. Sharkey and his team including Wesley Dean, Ph.D., and Courtney Nalty, M.S.P.H., identified hunger among children in 51 percent of households in this C-HCFRA sample. Participants from colonias near two small towns in South Texas participated in an in-home community and household assessment. Interviewer-administered surveys were used to collect data in Spanish on sociodemographics, federal food assistance program participation, and food security status.

“From the findings, we found that the presence of hungry children in a household was associated with select maternal characteristics, such as lower educational attainment and Mexican nativity, and household characteristics including household composition, reliance on friend or neighbor for transportation, food purchased at dollar stores and from neighbors, and participation in school-based nutrition programs,” states Sharkey. “A smaller percentage of households with child hunger, compared with households without child hunger, participated in school-based nutrition programs or used alternative food sources, while 131 households were unable to give their child or children a balanced meal during the school year and 145 households during the summer months.”

Sharkey further pointed out that the households most at risk for hunger among children had increased household composition and adults who were unemployed. Sharkey and his team found that participation in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and purchasing food from a neighbor were significantly associated with decreased odds for child hunger.

“It is unsettling that so many children did not participate in school-based nutrition programs, and that many who participated in federal nutrition assistance programs remained hungry,” states Sharkey. This study underscores the importance of identifying the presence of child hunger among low-income Mexican-origin children in Texas border colonias and increasing access to nutrition-related resources. Hunger-associated health inequities at younger ages among colonias residents are likely to persist across the life span and into old age.

Further explorations by Sharkey and his team will focus on strategies to address child hunger with young mothers that incorporate both knowledge and skill building. Ideally, this would include the empowerment of promotoras to deliver culturally- and linguistically-appropriate interventions and strategies.

A recent study shows alarming rates of child hunger among children of Mexican immigrants. The Program for Research and Outreach-Engagement on Nutrition and Health Disparities identified economic and family factors that increased the odds for child hunger as well as community strategies that reduced the odds among Mexican-origin families who reside in Texas border colonias.
One of CHOT’s newest projects involves working with the American Society for Anesthesiologists (ASA) to define best practices in perioperative surgical care.

Graduate education in professional programs provides students with the opportunity to experience the real world and build their portfolio of expertise before entering the workforce. However, one thing that makes the Texas A&M School of Public Health different from many other graduate programs in the country is the ability for students to work with the Center for Health Organization Transformation (CHOT) and conduct research side-by-side with industry experts across the nation.

In 2008 the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) awarded the Texas A&M School of Public Health and the H. Milton Stewart School of Industrial and Systems Engineering at the Georgia Institute of Technology funding for the establishment of a center focused on the advancement of health systems management and engineering. Over the next few years CHOT would grow to include Northeastern University and Penn State University. At Texas A&M and in its three partner universities, CHOT emphasizes bringing together health management researchers with those from industrial and systems engineering, information systems, and related fields.

CHOT’s total research budget is funded by the NSF and 16 industry members, including progressive health systems such as Texas Children’s Hospital, MD Anderson Cancer Center System, Partners HealthCare and well-known industry solution providers such as Verzon and Siemens. The industry members collaborate with the center’s universities in guiding and conducting the center’s research. Three additional universities from other regions of the country will be submitting planning grants to the NSF to join CHOT in the near future. Each new university will add at least three members to the collective, enabling CHOT to boast a much broader area of representation.

“One of the most unique aspects of the CHOT model is that the research projects are industry-driven. What would typically be done as two-party contracts between industries and consultants or individual researchers, is instead carried out using a cooperative model that presents results from across multiple systems and data sets, rather than one isolated area of study.”

“Each member comes to us with one or two research topics they want us to study, but then all of the results are pooled from across the universities and among all 16 members,” said Nick Edwardson, CHOT’s assistant director, and doctoral candidate. “Our research findings are not confined to situations at one or two locations but across several organizations.”

Through their cooperative research model, CHOT members from across all spectrums of the health care industry work with university faculty and doctoral students to conduct research on the latest innovations in data management, clinical practices, and other strategies for improving health.

“Doctoral students are learning in both the classroom and from research on current problems, relying on primary data collection and secondary data in their analyses. This type of research requires direct contact with professionals in the field and contributes to graduate students’ competitiveness in the academic job market,” said Gamm. “The experience also gives them more tacit understanding of both the workings of the health care system and how to conduct team-based research.”

One of CHOT’s most successful research relationships is with the Studer Group. This industry member has contracted with over 800 hospitals across the U.S. and abroad to implement their Evidence-Based Leadership (EBL) framework that is comprised of a series of tools and best practices in communicating with patients and staff to improve efficiency and quality of care. CHOT’s research on EBL implements in two hospitals has examined specific elements that contribute to its success and sustainability. Still other projects are focused on how specific EBL practices can reduce the need for costly hospital readmissions or improving communication among nurses and with patients during nurse shift changes.

Many of CHOT’s current projects are being derived from health care organizations’ responses to the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. Projects that have addressed the creation of medical homes and integration of physicians with hospitals are driven, at least in part, by government health reform and changing demands from health insurers.

Still other projects are addressing emergency department usage and workflow, development of perioperative surgical centers, and the consequences of sleep disruption among infants in neo-natal intensive care units. One of the center’s newest projects involves working with the American Society for Anesthesiologists (ASA) to define best practices in perioperative surgical care. The project will eventually allow the standards of care for organizations seeking to obtain Perioperative Surgical Home status.

“What we are doing is trying to determine what are the things that need to be done before, during, and after any surgery to minimize errors, reduce patient complications, and maximize throughput,” said Bita Kash, Ph.D., M.B.A., newly appointed CHOT director and principal investigator for the ASA project. “We are at the forefront, through the ASA, trying to identify what are the best practices that need to be better understood and put into practice across the country to increase safety and efficiency in surgical settings,” she added.

Projects with national implications such as the ASA perioperative surgical home project will improve the reputation of CHOT and fulfill its vision of becoming nationally recognized for transformation in the healthcare industry. “The faculty and students from these great universities look forward to developing even stronger working relationships with visionary health systems who share a commitment to transformation in health care,” said Gamm. “All of us seek to ensure that the center adds value for all participants in taking health services research and education to the next level.”
School Serving as Statewide Evaluator of Medicaid Waiver Program

Since Medicaid’s creation as the United States health program for certain people with disabilities and families with low incomes, both the federal government and the states have grappled with the most effective way to administer the program. Faced with the latest Medicaid initiative, the Texas 1115 Medicaid Transformation Waiver, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission has sought the expertise of the Texas A&M School of Public Health to serve as statewide evaluator of the program.

“Texas, like every other state in the country, is dealing with rising healthcare costs at the same time that millions of people have inadequate health service access,” said Rebecca Wells, Ph.D., health policy and management department head, who is leading the evaluation team. “If we can make something work and figure out why it works here, then the rest of the country might be able to learn from that,” said Monica Wendel, Dr.P.H., assistant professor and co-leader of the evaluation team. “As statewide evaluators assessing how this waiver works and to what degree it is successful for Texas, we are on the ground floor of something that has important national implications.”

Working with the Texas Health and Human Services Commission, the evaluation will focus on two components of the Medicaid Waiver: uncompensated care for hospitals and the effectiveness of the new Delivery System Reform Incentive Pool (DSRIP) program that supports innovative projects aimed at improving health care for the nation as a whole. These include increasing its adaptability to changing healthcare needs and increasing its flexibility of the Medicaid standards as well as increasing its adaptability to changing healthcare needs and provider supply in the future.

The Medicaid Waiver, approved by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services in December 2011, is being implemented across the state by 20 regional healthcare partnerships. These partnerships are comprised of stakeholders such as public hospitals, hospital districts, public health departments, counties, cities, local mental health authorities, private hospitals, and academic health science centers. According to Wendel, with the 1115 Medicaid waivers, there will now be a “mechanism for communities to increase involvement, increase access to federal funds, and retain some control over how they deliver care.”

The changes being made in both uncompensated care and delivery systems reform are designed to reform the healthcare system as a whole. A high quality, efficient, and accessible healthcare system really does affect whole populations. For example, currently, many people go to hospital emergency departments when their needs would be better met by prevention, primary care, or behavioral health crisis facilities. This also creates unpredictable surges in demand that in turn can delay other people’s treatment for medical emergencies. The HHSC-A&M evaluation team will therefore examine a range of projects around the State using care navigators to reduce emergency department use.

There are many states looking at implementing a similar waiver system. Because Texas is such a large and diverse state, not only in geography, which includes frontier communities to highly urban metropolitan areas, but also ethnically, the findings from this evaluation can have major implications for the nation as a whole. These include increasing the flexibility of the Medicaid standards as well as increasing its adaptability to changing healthcare needs and provider supply in the future.

The school will use a prospective comparative case study design to analyze factors affecting project outcomes. They will be looking for projects that deal with individuals facing a high burden of disease. This means a combination of not only those issues that affect a large number of people, but profoundly impact people’s quality of life.

“There are substantial funds available at the federal level that states are eligible for to assist in providing care to people who don’t have health insurance or adequate health insurance to cover the cost of their care,” said Wendel. “The problem is that the state has not been able to historically access all of the funds that are set aside for our state because of the way the program has been structured.”

“How to improve access within public budgets is one of the most pressing public policy dilemmas we face,” said Wells.

The Medicaid Waiver, approved by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services in December 2011, is being implemented across the state by 20 regional healthcare partnerships. These partnerships are comprised of stakeholders such as public hospitals, hospital districts, public health departments, counties, cities, local mental health authorities, private hospitals, and academic health science centers. According to Wendel, with the 1115 Medicaid waivers, there will now be a “mechanism for communities to increase involvement, increase access to federal funds, and retain some control over how they deliver care.”

Many people go to hospital emergency departments when their needs would be better met by prevention, primary care, or behavioral health crisis facilities.
Connecting with Communities to Improve Health

With an increased national focus on the promotion and implementation of preventive health care, it is critical to support research that leads to the ongoing development and improvement of prevention activities. It is also important that prevention research incorporate community participation in their work to produce innovative, yet practical results that can lead to population health improvement. The research conducted at the Center for Community Health Development (CCHD) at the Texas A&M School of Public Health aims to contribute to the field of health prevention research not just by piloting interventions, but also by determining what community factors influence the development, implementation, and adoption of these strategies. As a result, communities are key partners in CCHD’s research activities.

Founded in the fall of 2001, CCHD was awarded funding and designated a Prevention Research Center by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2004. This funding provided continued support for CCHD’s research activities in both the rural Brazos Valley area surrounding the small urban community where Texas A&M is located and in the four southernmost counties in South Texas. Working in both areas of Texas, CCHD has built community partnerships using a community health development process of assessment, planning, and implementation. Through this process, CCHD helps communities identify their needs, recognize their resources, and develop community-designed solutions that address local health care issues. By partnering with communities, CCHD is able to investigate what contributes to a community’s capacity to develop and sustain local health improvement strategies. In an effort to continually expand and increase its presence, CCHD has served more than 100 of Texas’ 254 counties and collaborates on projects in several states throughout the country.

To date, CCHD has worked on over 70 projects and received nearly $47 million in funding through contracts and grants. CCHD has conducted a wide range of research and worked on a variety of projects. Research topics have included building community capacity, diabetes prevention and management, improving cancer outcomes through education and physical activity, geo caching for exercise, promoting healthy food environments, and addressing childhood obesity through the implementation of standing desks in classrooms.

Over the span of its existence, the CCHD has conducted five population health status assessments, four in the Brazos Valley and one in South Texas, which have led to the development of services and research provided through the Center. In the Brazos Valley, two persistent health concerns are access to mental health services and lack of transportation. Interim Dean Jim Burdine notes, “When we look at those [issues] in combination, telemental health...is the solution that met both of those concerns.” This issue led to CCHD partnering with the Texas A&M University Department of Educational Psychology to form the Telehealth Counseling Clinic. The clinic provides telehealth counseling through remote clinics throughout the Brazos Valley via videoconference technology and their services include therapy sessions for a variety of presenting concerns.

The Center has also partnered with local organizations to assist in the formation of community health initiatives. CCHD partnered with four local counties to develop Health Resource Centers (HRCs) that focus on increasing access to health and social services for their residents. Towanda Webber, a resident of Madison County and Office Manager of the Madison County Health Resource Center acknowledges that “so many of our residents have access to services that they didn’t used to have access to. It is truly a blessing.” CCHD assists the resource centers in building infrastructure, securing funding and evaluating the services provided so the HRCs may become sustainable assets for their community.

To help build community capacity and increase physical activity in the Brazos Valley, CCHD worked with local counties on the Physical Activity and Community Engagement Project. With much success, two counties have implemented exercise programs for older adults to improve mobility and prevent falls. According to Grimes County Commission member Pam Finke who has personal friends that have participated in the classes, “several participants mentioned how beneficial the exercises taught in class were and they even continue to practice the exercises at home.”

In addition to research, CCHD has established a National Community Health Worker (CHW) Training Center that provides several state-certified trainings in both English and Spanish via face-to-face classes or online courses. With an intimate knowledge of the culture, language, and life experiences of the residents they serve, CHWs act as a liaison between health care service providers and community members. The national recognition of the CHW program reflects the Center’s ability to respond to increasing demand for available trainings.

The Center is also well known for its practical experience and training opportunities for graduate students, employing over 165 doctoral, graduate, and undergraduate students, providing hands-on experience in community based participatory research. To guarantee that the lessons learned through the Center’s work is used to inform future researchers, CCHD strives to integrate projects into relevant master- and doctoral-level courses for students and to employ students whenever possible.

The Center for Community Health Development continues to be a pioneer in its approach to improving health. Using the Center’s community health development model to conduct meaningful and relevant research ensures that CCHD will remain at the forefront of public health research and will continue to address health concerns of communities.

The clinic provides telehealth counseling through remote clinics throughout the Brazos Valley via videoconference technology.
Taking Control of Childhood Asthma in South Texas

Throughout the past two decades asthma cases have steadily increased as a major pediatric health concern across the United States and in Texas. According to the American Lung Association and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, asthma is one of the most common chronic disorders for children today.

The Rio Grande Valley of South Texas has some of the highest asthma related hospitalization rates for children in the state. This is in large part due to high levels of pollen in the air, high usage of agriculture pesticides, and a high poverty rate.

“Many people are not aware that the majority of asthma triggers may be found in and around their homes,” said Genny Carrillo Zuniga, M.D., Sc.D., M.S.P.H., M.P.H., associate professor at the McAllen Campus of the Texas A&M School of Public Health.

Common asthma triggers, according to Carrillo Zuniga, include mold, dust mites, pet dander, rodent and insect droppings, excessive moisture, cleaning products, pesticides and cigarette smoke.

In 2008, Carrillo Zuniga formed the McAllen Asthma Coalition (MAC) with support funding from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Texas Department of State Health Services. MAC brings together students and educators from local colleges, with representatives from the American Lung Association and other government organizations, to develop an educational curriculum on how to properly identify asthma triggers and manage asthma symptoms.

Carrillo Zuniga has spent the past five years developing culturally appropriate self-management training programs for asthma sufferers and their families in order to decrease the number of asthma related hospitalizations, emergency room visits, and missed school days for children. At the McAllen Campus, she trains respiratory therapy students from South Texas College (STC) and nursing students from the University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA), who in turn educate elementary and middle school children and school nursing staff on asthma management and control.

“It has been rewarding to initiate this collaborative with local higher education institutions to address asthma as a public health improvement project,” said Carrillo Zuniga.

Her goal has been to provide families, health professionals and school nursing staff with the necessary health education and training to properly manage and prevent asthma attacks for children.

With the help of Carrillo Zuniga and this multi-institutional collaboration, 16 schools in the Rio Grande Valley have received asthma training. In addition, UTPA nursing majors have organized health fairs for children and parents at several schools.

“This has been a wonderful experience for our students,” said Betty Chong-Menard, RRT, RN, M.Ed., director of clinical education at the STC Respiratory Therapy Program.

“This project has provided multiple opportunities for our students to interact with children resulting in an increased awareness of asthma in the pediatric population. Additionally, our students also gain valuable experience in developing and implementing lesson plans and more importantly, foster critical thinking skills, especially as it relates to overcoming obstacles such as language barriers.”

Another MAC program utilizes community health workers to instruct Spanish-speaking families about healthy indoor environments and asthma triggers. They then follow up with home visits to provide families with individual training for their environment.

“The education I have received from this program has helped me control my daughters’ asthma, helped me clear my home of asthma triggers, and I have learned how to better manage their asthma medication,” said Yvon Garcia, a mother of two who participated in the education program. “The health of both my daughters has improved greatly and I am very happy to have received this training.”

Carrillo Zuniga is currently working on an additional EPA-funded study focusing on children from minority and low-income populations who receive care at the Rio Grande Regional Hospital. She is addressing the education of children with asthma, or their caregivers, and the training of health care professionals to identify and manage environmental triggers.

“Rio Grande Regional Hospital’s Respiratory Therapies Services collaborated with Dr. Carrillo Zuniga has been rewarding to both our staff and surrounding communities,” said Kenneth Smith, director of the hospital’s respiratory therapy services. “Dr. Carrillo Zuniga’s research contributions have led to a better understanding of how to educate our underserved community members.”

From culturally appropriate educational interventions to unique collaborations with primary schools, higher education institutions and hospitals, the school is successfully addressing a major public health issue in Texas by improving the quality of life of children suffering with asthma. Through Carrillo Zuniga’s work, South Texas communities will be positively impacted for years to come.
Phone App Paves the Way for Young Adult Cancer Survivors

In the increasingly technological world we live in, it seems there is now a phone app for everything we do – from restaurant ratings to what to buy for the best price and where. It’s not surprising that we can now use our phones to aid us in the journey to healthier lives. A new app is helping young adult cancer survivors navigate long-term care plans from their mobile devices.

The Adolescent and Young Adult (AYA) Healthy Survivorship app, offers cancer survivors ages 15-39 years personalized tips for being more active, eating better, living a healthier life, and provides an interactive assessment tool that includes a Body Mass Index (BMI) calculator.

Creator Deborah Vollmer Dahlke, who is chair of the Cancer Alliance of Texas and a doctoral student, recently presented information about the technology during a National Cancer Institute’s Research-to-Reality Webinar. According to Vollmer Dahlke, improving the quality of life and potential outcomes for youth and young adults diagnosed with cancer has become increasingly important and are the driving forces for the design.

“The most important thing with treating young adult cancer survivors is knowing their history and what to look out for,” says Maria Marek, RN, clinical nurse navigator with the Seton Cancer Survivor Center, who gives the phone app to all her young cancer patients. “Avoiding secondary cancer is key for young survivors.”

The technology raises awareness for long-term care plans and gives the patient a sense of control when it comes to their life after cancer.

“It wasn’t until I began using the app that I became aware of the things I could be doing to stay healthy after cancer,” said Laura Ybarra, a cancer survivor and AYA Healthy Survivorship app user. “It puts all the information and resources you need in one convenient spot.”

For Ybarra, now a military spouse who is constantly on the move, having something easy and portable to provide her with daily reminders concerning follow-up appointments and healthy eating tips is “tremendously helpful.”

“It was nice to download an app and automatically receive daily advice without having to manually access the information,” said Ybarra. “With flyers and brochures, they eventually become junk, but with the app, the information comes to you.”

Regents and Distinguished Professor Dr. Marcia Ory notes young adult cancer survivors often lack clear guidance about cancer follow-up care and what can be done to foster healthy survivorship.

“Drawing on evidence-based guidelines and practices, this app has the potential to reach a large number of adolescent and young adult cancer survivors and make a difference in the quality of their post-treatment lives,” Ory said.

The phone app outlines current cancer screening guidelines and offers direct access to the Children’s Oncology Group’s Health Links that provides bilingual information about long-term effects of cancer care and treatments.

“Everyone likes a shortcut that takes you directly to what you need,” Marek says. “This app gives cancer survivors some peace of mind and an indication on how they are doing, their life now, and what it can be.”

Development of the AYA phone app was supported through the Communities of Texas: Cancer Activity Research Education Support (CTxCARES) program, a project funded through the Center for Community Health Development. Ory serves as principal investigator of the CTxCARES program.

Additional information on the AYA Healthy Survivorship app can be found at healthysurvivorship.org.
Educat ing communities on the importance of cancer prevention and regular screenings has become a major concern for public health professionals across the country. This is especially true in the case of minorities and women residing in rural and low-income areas with limited access to regular healthcare. Implementing cancer screening programs in the context of training physicians, nurses, and public health professionals can be transformative.

Jane Bolin, B.S.N., J.D., Ph.D., professor and director of the Southwest Rural Health Research Center, has worked diligently to ensure disadvantaged populations are properly informed of their health risks and to facilitate access to quality cancer screenings and preventive care.

“In spite of increasing gains in cancer screening and prevention in urban areas, inequalities in cancer screenings and outcomes are well documented in rural areas, especially for racial/ethnic minorities and those of low socioeconomic status,” said Bolin. “Differences in access to screenings and preventive cancer care may contribute to these disparities.” Over the past several years, Bolin has worked closely with the Cancer Prevention and Research Institute of Texas (CPRIT) to provide community outreach and education to low-income rural residents in the Brazos Valley, a nine-county region of central Texas. Through two major prevention projects funded by CPRIT, Bolin has worked to increase awareness regarding colorectal, breast, and cervical cancer risks and to improve access to available screenings and preventive care.

In 2013, Bolin and along with David McClellan, M.D., assistant professor of family and community medicine in the Texas A&M College of Medicine, was awarded a three-year $2,748,008 million dollar grant aimed at improving access to post-diagnosis screening and prevention activities in the Brazos Valley. The grant helped fund cancer prevention efforts in the Brazos Valley. However, this time it was a $1.5 million dollar grant aimed at increasing breast and cervical cancer screenings, HPV vaccines to prevent cervical cancer, and follow-up diagnostic services for low-income women.

“The grant will address a critical unmet need for breast and cervical cancer screening and prevention activities in the nine-county region of Central Texas,” said Bolin. “Ultimately, we hope to increase the number of low-income, underserved patients receiving colon cancer screenings in the Brazos Valley, as well as the number of family medicine physicians trained to conduct colonoscopy screenings; increase the capacity of the Texas A&M College of Medicine Family Medicine Residency Program to provide colonoscopies; and provide promotors (bilingual community health workers) as patient navigators.

As a result of the combined efforts of several unique partnerships throughout the Brazos Valley and the state of Texas, the C-STEP project team successfully conducted 981 colorectal cancer screenings for poor residents in this region. Twenty-seven percent of those patients had abnormal pathology. By utilizing the significant strengths of each organization, this project has provided thousands of Brazos Valley residents with the opportunity to learn more about colon cancer and how they can prevent it. It serves as a national model for translating colon cancer prevention, screening, and education services into family medicine residency training while supporting patients through the complex health care system.

In 2014, Bolin serves on the “Transforming Texas” initiative aimed at preventing chronic diseases. Bolin also serves on the DHHS Compliance and Institutional Review Board (IRB) Committee and as a peer reviewer in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Agency for Healthcare Research & Quality (AHRQ), Safety and Quality Improvement study section.

Saving Lives and Transforming Academic Medicine One Cancer Screening at a Time

Texas women who receive clinical breast exams, pap smears, and HPV vaccines.” With the help of this project, the Texas A&M Health Science Center will assist organizations in providing breast and cervical cancer screenings, HPV vaccinations, education on the importance of preventive health, and provide training to physicians, nurses, and community health workers in culturally appropriate diagnostic procedures and patient care.

The project will also improve access to follow-up care from community health workers and access to post-diagnosis surgeons and oncologists. The grant will provide hands-on practice for family medicine residents and nursing students in a simulated environment, as well as educate public health students in breast and cervical cancer related activities and disease management strategies.

“Rural and medically underserved areas of Texas, including the Brazos Valley, continue to demonstrate higher rates of breast and cervical cancer than the Texas state average,” said Janet Helduser, M.A., program manager for the CPRIT grants. “With the help of this project we can not only increase patient awareness, but improve family medicine, nursing, and public health practices along the entire cancer care continuum.”

“These grants from CPRIT are vital to advancing our ability to solve complex health problems and disparities through multidisciplinary approaches,” said Bolin. “These programs will address the overwhelming need for a greater number of family medicine providers, nurses, and public health specialists who are prepared to provide evidence-based cancer care in rural and underserved areas.”
Preparing Leaders for Global Impact

The Texas A&M School of Public Health is preparing the next generation of international development practitioners through an innovative global health policy and practice capstone experience.

The collaborative capstone brought together 19 students from our school and the George Bush School of Government and Public Service. In this one-semester course, students conducted a meta-review of health systems and governance in conflict-affected countries with a special emphasis on the West African country of Liberia.

The global health policy and practice capstone reflects interdisciplinary reform efforts currently taking place within the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Public health students learned that global health interventions not only bring assistance to the needy, but are often influenced by the overall foreign policy objectives of a country.

Kristina Beaugh was one of the students who participated in this unique course and enjoyed participating in the cross-sectoral, multi-disciplinary effort to align citizen needs and health service delivery.

According to Beaugh, “Students worked on three areas of the project - one group completed a comparative analysis of health systems in Liberia and other conflict-affected countries; another group used Liberia as a case study for health systems and governance; and the final group prepared a monitoring and evaluation plan to assess progress towards health governance goals.”

Beaugh is one of the students who will present their findings in person to the USAID cross-sector programs team in Washington, D.C. The presentation will be joined remotely by representatives of the USAID Mission in Monrovia, Liberia, as well as faculty, staff, and students from Texas A&M University.

Standing Desks – Fighting Childhood Obesity and Increasing Attentiveness

Educators continue to work to find a balance between time for physical activity and class time, knowing that many students are not getting the level of daily physical activity they need to maintain a healthy weight. One of the most innovative approaches to this issue is the use of the stand-biased desk in classroom settings, which has been studied by researchers at the school for the last several years. The stand-biased desk gives children the option to sit or stand during classroom instruction.

A recent grant for $1 million from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has been awarded to Stand2Learn™, a Positive Motion, LLC company, including a $400,563 award to the Texas A&M School of Public Health. Mark Benden, Ph.D., CPE, associate professor, will serve as the lead researcher in the school’s continued work with the company and the Phase II implementation of the dynamic classroom model. Other faculty collaborators will be Drs. Monica Wendel and Hongwei Zhao.

In Phase I, the study evaluated the impact of the stand-biased desks for elementary school students, grades 1st-4th.

“Students in classrooms with the standing-height desks chose to stand more than two-thirds of the time and burned an average of 17 percent more calories at the same time.”

In addition to increased physical activity, teachers noted that standing desks seemed to increase attentiveness of students, while decreasing disruptive behavior.

Phase II will look at students grades 5th-12th and how well the impact translates from students in primary school to secondary education students.

“Stand-biased desks give students the maximum flexibility and allows for the most movement and postural variety when participating in a learning environment,” said Benden. “As more schools implement dynamic classrooms, the paradigm of seated instruction can potentially shift to one that is conducive to alertness and attentiveness while increasing passive calorie burn at the same time.”

Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) awards are typically collaboration between industry members, government agencies and academia. They are designed to bring innovative products to market and stimulate the growth of small businesses. This is the first SBIR Phase II award for the Texas A&M School of Public Health, and it will enable the expansion of this study as well as the implementation of Positive Motion’s next generation of stand-biased desk designs into the classroom. Findings from this study could allow for new strategies to preventing childhood obesity as well as impacting state and national policies regarding the classroom environment.

Over 50 percent of faculty and staff at the school are using standing desks. Left, Dr. Benden is pictured while teaching students in a classroom with standing desks.
An Aggie takes Rural Healthcare Reform to the Steps of Washington, D.C.

As a major educational institution in the state of Texas, many of our students have experienced firsthand the effects of rural life and the health care obstacles facing residents of rural communities. Often our students seek an education in public health so that they might one day have an impact on the quality of life and quality of care for the rural populations they call home.

As a native of South Texas, Amy Elizondo, M.P.H., a graduate of our school and a member of the school’s alumni board of directors, has always had a passion for rural healthcare and sought to find ways of impacting rural and underserved communities in a positive way. Over the last 12 years, she has worked tirelessly with numerous government and nonprofit organizations to increase healthcare training, raise awareness on rural health issues, and improve access to care for individuals living in rural America.

“My education at the Texas A&M School of Public Health provided me with a solid foundation in public health and health services practices, allowing me to set my sights on a national scope of work that I never could have imagined,” said Elizondo. “I was fortunate enough to be guided by professors that were instrumental in steering me towards the possibility of working on a national level,” said Elizondo.

Following graduation in 2002, Elizondo embarked on an adventure to Washington, D.C. to complete a practicum with the Health Resources and Services Administration’s Federal Office of Rural Health Policy. She managed to pack all of her belongings into her 1998 Ford Escort and began the long journey to the Capitol of the free world.

“Having never been to Washington, D.C., this trip was my first introduction into what has been one of the biggest adventures of my life,” states Elizondo.

When her practicum was completed, Elizondo decided to stay in Washington, D.C. and took a position serving as the primary legislative analyst for rural healthcare and post-acute care issues at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services’ (CMS) Office of Legislation. She would later serve as a special assistant to the director of the Medicare outreach team working with stakeholder groups during the implementation of the Medicare prescription drug benefit.

During her time at the CMS, Elizondo had the opportunity to work on the Medicare Modernization Act of 2003, a historic time in healthcare history. The experience also afforded her a front row seat into how policy programs come to fruition and how they impact those working on the frontlines of healthcare.

“My experiences at CMS allowed me to continue to focus on rural healthcare, and provided a bird’s eye view of the regulatory and legislative world of health policy,” states Elizondo.

In 2006, Elizondo joined the National Rural Health Association (NRHA), a non-profit membership organization with a mission to provide leadership on rural health issues through advocacy, communications, education, and research. As the vice president of program services for NRHA, Elizondo oversees numerous grant programs and initiatives for the association such as the NRHA’s Border Health Initiative; the Rural Training Track Technical Assistance Demonstration Program for strengthening the rural primary care workforce; and the National Rural Community Health Worker Training Network to improve access to care for rural residents.

“I was fortunate enough to be guided by professors that were instrumental in steering me towards the possibility of working on a national level,” said Elizondo.

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Institute of Medicine names Lillibridge to Health Threats Committee

Scott Lillibridge, M.D., assistant dean and professor, has been appointed to the Institute of Medicine Health Threats Resilience Standing Committee.

Comprised of experts in a variety of public health and emergency management and preparedness fields, the Institute of Medicine Health Threats Resilience Standing Committee provides recommendations to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Office of Health Affairs. The committee specifically addresses topics in community resilience against health threats; health security; emergency response; and capacity and gaps in the federal, state, and local authorities’ ability to respond to catastrophic health events.

A 30-year veteran in medical and public health preparedness, Lillibridge also serves as deputy principal investigator and chief scientist for the Texas A&M Center for Innovation in Advanced Development and Manufacturing (CIADM).

Founded on an initial $285.6 million public-private partnership with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Texas A&M CIADM is designed to enhance the nation’s preparedness and response against emerging infectious diseases, including pandemic influenza, and chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear threats.

“This distinguished committee assists in driving decisions that directly impact our nation’s security and preparedness initiatives,” Lillibridge said. “It is an honor to be chosen and given the opportunity to link our work at Texas A&M in bio-defense and emerging infectious disease with national priorities.”

Previously, Lillibridge served as founding director of the CDC Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Program and also worked as Special Assistant to the Secretary for the Department of Health and Human Services.

“With his long-standing career in public service, Scott brings incomparable experience to the committee and continues the Aggie tradition of service to our nation,” said Brett P. Giroir, M.D., executive vice president and CEO of the Texas A&M HSC. “His efforts will result in policy creation that will, ultimately, keep people safe – and that’s one of the best examples of service any scientist can offer.”

Burdine serves on DSHS Committee

James Burdine, Dr.P.H., interim dean, has been selected to serve as a member of the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) Public Health Funding and Policy Committee established by Senate Bill 969 in the 82nd Texas Legislative Session.

“I look forward to meeting with you and having the benefit of your expertise and experience in advising me and the department on public health funding and policy issues in Texas,” states David Lakey, M.D., DSHS commissioner.

The committee will make recommendations on various issues relating to local health entities (local health units, local health departments and public health districts). The recommendations will relate to funding and communications between the entities and DSHS, as well as more general public health policy issues facing the state.

Sumaya appointed to Gulf Oil Spill Board

Ciro V. Sumaya, M.D., M.P.H.T.M., professor and holder of the Cox Endowed Chair in Medicine, has been appointed by Texas Gov. Rick Perry to the Gulf of Mexico Initiative Research Board.

British Petroleum has committed up to $500 million to the GRI open research program to study the impact of the Deepwater Horizon incident, and its associated response, on the environment and public health in the Gulf of Mexico.

“I feel very privileged to participate in setting a research agenda that will expand the knowledge to address environmental disasters in general and improve, in particular, the environmental conditions of the Gulf of Mexico region following this major oil spill,” Sumaya said.

Sumaya served as founding dean of the Texas A&M School of Public Health for 10 years. Previously, he was a presidential appointee at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. He first served as an administrator at the Health Resources and Services Administration, a federal focal point for innovation in health care delivery and health professions education, and subsequently as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Health, spearheading the federal Initiative on the Future of Academic Health Centers.

Alexander receives Texas Rural Health Association Award

James L. Alexander, Ph.D., associate professor, received the Rural Health Academic/Preceptor Award by the Texas Rural Health Association. The award recognizes collegiate educators who have played a significant part in improving rural health care throughout the state of Texas.

Alexander has served as a faculty member of the department of health policy and management since 2001. In addition, he has served as the practicum coordinator, working with students during a 10-week program to apply their knowledge from the classroom to real-world situations.

Prior to coming to the school, Alexander was influential in founding the Texas Organization of Rural and Community Hospitals (TORCH) and has extensive experience as a healthcare facility executive. His knowledge and experience have influenced not only many of the careers of graduates of the school, but the way rural healthcare services are delivered across the state.
VIREDER SHARMA, Ph.D., M.Tech., M.Sc.  
Professor, Environmental & Occupational Health Dept.

Received his Ph.D. in Marine and Atmospheric Chemistry from the University of Miami, M.Tech. from the Indian Institute of Technology, and both his M.Sc. and B.Sc. from the University of Delhi, India - current research includes a National Science Foundation study to examine air pollution and health effects of nanoparticles and ferrites by ferrates (VI, V, and IV). Also, conducting a study for the National Science and Engineering, Research Council of Canada on clean technologies for water refining and nutrient/energy recovery. An international researcher with more than 200 peer-reviewed publications and author/co-editor of five books, Dr. Sharma research interests include the inactivation of virus, bacteria, and toxins in water and air and removal of emerging contaminants such as antibiotics, estrogen, and toxic metals in water; formation, fate, and toxicity of silver and gold engineered and natural nanoparticles in aquatic environment; and applications of ferrites to destroy toxins and pollutants under solar light.

HYE-CHUNG KUM, Ph.D., M.S.  
Associate Professor, Health Policy & Management Dept.

Received a Ph.D. and M.S. in Computer Science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as well as a Master of Social Work. She received a B.S. in Computer Science from Yonsei University, Seoul Korea - current research projects include the National Science Foundation Big Data project called DataBridge on discovering relevant research datasets and the Texas 1115 Medicaid Waiver statewide evaluation. Research interests include data science for healthcare providers and public health; health informatics; health policy research and program evaluation using big data; and decision support systems for health policy and management.

JENNIFER HORNEY, Ph.D., M.P.H., CPH  
Associate Professor, Epidemiology & Biostatistics Dept.

Received her Ph.D. in Epidemiology and M.P.H. in Public Health Leadership from the Gillings School of Global Public Health at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a B.A. from UNC-Chapel Hill - current research includes a National Science Foundation study on community recovery planning for vulnerable populations following disasters. Also, working on a Department of Homeland Security grant developing a checklist to measure community recovery following disasters. Pilot testing of checklist in areas of New York impacted by Superstorm Sandy funded by FEMA through the New York Hurricane Sandy Recovery Office. Research interests include public health impact of disasters, community recovery, and field epidemiology methods.

SEAN GREGORY, M.B.A., M.S., Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor, Health Policy & Management Dept. and Pediatrics Dept. in the College of Medicine

Received both his Ph.D. and M.S. in Health Services Research, Policy and Administration from the University of Minnesota and both a M.B.A. and B.S. from Florida State University. Prior to his academic career, Dr. Gregory served in several executive roles in health care, at both a national health insurer and an integrated delivery system - current research projects include the Texas 1115 Medicaid Waiver statewide evaluation; assessment of the rate structure and utilization patterns of pediatric acute care therapy (occupational, physical, speech) in Texas; and a survey of physician attitudes, preferences, and usage of comparative effectiveness research and evidence-based medicine. Recent work includes the comparison of diagnosis protocols for appendicitis, trends in screening and treatment for elevated cholesterol in children, and reporting the causes and consequences of physician burnout. His research interests focus on pediatric outcomes and cost-effectiveness, impacts of physician integration, and decision science applications in health care.

DARCY MCMAGUHN, Ph.D., M.S.Ed.  
Assistant Professor, Health Policy & Management Dept.

Director of the Program on Disability, Aging, Long-Term Care Policy

Received her Ph.D. in Health Services Research from the Texas A&M Health Science Center School of Public Health and both her M.S.Ed. in Education Psychology and a B.A. in Psychology from Texas A&M University - current research project funded by the American Institutes for Research through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, where she is creating an antibiotic stewardship guide for nursing homes. The guide will be tested in select nursing homes in Pennsylvania, California, Minnesota and Texas before released in final form. She is also part of the Texas 1115 Medicaid Waiver statewide evaluation team. Previously, she has conducted research on elderly abuse in long-term care in the U.S., pain management among Texas Medicaid recipients, quality of nursing home care in Texas, falls deaths among older adults, and the relationship between formal and informal care among Medicaid home care recipients in Texas.

TANYA GARCIA, Ph.D., M.S.  
Assistant Professor, Epidemiology & Biostatistics Dept.

Received her Ph.D. in Statistics from Texas A&M University, a M.S. in Industrial Engineering & Operations from U.C. Berkeley, a M.S. in Statistics from the University of Western Ontario, and a B.A. in Mathematics from U.C. Irvine - current research includes a Human Biology Fellowship from the Huntington Disease (HD) Society to develop modern statistical techniques to assess patient-specific markers of HD to discover their usefulness in predicting HD motor-diagnosis. The improved predictions will ultimately provide more informative genetic counseling sessions for presymptomatic carriers in both treatment options and making important life decisions such as marriage or family planning. Research interests include neurodegenerative diseases, genetic mixture models, kin-cohort studies, and modeling microbiome features.

BRANDIE TAYLOR, Ph.D., M.P.H.  
Assistant Professor, Epidemiology & Biostatistics Dept.

Received her Ph.D. and M.P.H. in Epidemiology from the University of Pittsburgh. Completed Postdoctoral Fellowships at both the University of Pittsburgh and Michigan State University - research interests are in reproductive and perinatal epidemiology including the role of maternal genetics and the immune system in reproductive and pregnancy complications. She recently completed studies on the role of inflammation and leptin in the risk of developing preeclampsia, the association between genetic variants in Toll-like receptors genes and pelvic inflammatory disease; and genetic variants in the interferon-epsilon gene and pelvic inflammatory disease.

S. CAMILLE PERES, Ph.D., M.A.  
Assistant Professor, Environmental & Occupational Health Dept.

Received a Ph.D. and M.A. in Psychology with a focus on human-computer interaction from Rice and a M.A. in Psychology from the University of Houston at Clearlake - current projects include aging research and working as a biostatistician on a clinical trial investigating the safety of arginine supplementation in human subjects. Research interests include measurement error models, psychometrics, bioinformatics, biostatistics of aging, cancer and diabetes research. Received both a Dr.P.H. and M.S. in Industrial Engineering from John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health - current research projects include characterizing exposure to fine particulate matter in populations at high risk for asthma in South Texas as well as population-based experimental mouse models of particulate matter induced asthma. Her research interests include early life exposures to environmental contaminants, prevention of adverse developmental outcomes such as low birth weight and asthma, biomarkers of exposure and disease risk, health disparities in underserved populations, and gene environment interactions.

RANJANA MEHTA, Ph.D., M.S., M.Eng.  
Assistant Professor, Environmental & Occupational Health Dept.

Received both a Ph.D. and M.S. in Industrial & Systems Engineering from Virginia Tech, an M.Eng. from SUNY at the University of Buffalo, and a B.Eng. from the University of Mumbai - current projects include investigating role of stress and obesity on musculoskeletal injury and risk of ergonomic risk assessment, ergonomic design, and risk of injury that associated with interactive software usage. Research interests include neuroergonomic evaluation of stress and fatigue, investigating obesity and the aging brain, and evaluation of Fall prevention technologies.

CARMEN TEKWE, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor, Epidemiology & Biostatistics Dept.

Received her Ph.D. in Biostatistics from the University of Buffalo and both her M.Sc. and B.Sc. in Statistics from the University of Florida - current projects include aging research and working as a biostatistician on a clinical trial investigating the safety of arginine supplementation in human subjects. Research interests include measurement error models, psychometrics, bioinformatics, biostatistics of aging, cancer and diabetes research, nutritional and radiation epidemiology, and longitudinal data analysis, survival analysis, functional data analysis and neurostatistics.

NATALIE JOHNSON, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor, Environmental & Occupational Health Dept.

Received both a Ph.D. in Toxicology and a B.S. in Biology from Texas A&M University. She completed a Postdoctoral Fellowship at John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health - current research projects include characterizing exposure to fine particulate matter in populations at high risk for asthma in South Texas as well as population-based experimental mouse models of particulate matter induced asthma. Her research interests include early life exposures to environmental contaminants, prevention of adverse developmental outcomes such as low birth weight and asthma, biomarkers of exposure and disease risk, health disparities in underserved populations, and gene environment interactions.
Nigeria Student Sponsorship Program

Throughout Nigeria the need is great for public health researchers and practitioners. As a result, Reach Care Foundation-Nigeria (RCF-N) has been instrumental in leveraging relationships with Nigerian states’ governments to create a pipeline of students to pursue their M.P.H. or Dr.P.H. at the Texas A&M School of Public Health.

Previously an infectious disease physician in a federal medical center, Tijjani Sani, is one of the first Nigerian students in her class last semester.

“Tijjani is very well prepared for public health work,” said Bashir Dabo, associate professor in the department of epidemiology and biostatistics, who had several Nigerian students in his class last semester.

“I was so impressed with their commitment to public health and enthusiasm for learning,” said Dr. Shipp. “Many were eager to get research experience by volunteering their time.”

“Follow up by RCF-N indicates that the students are performing very well academically,” says Dr. Nandula Durfa, managing director of RCF-N. “Because of the anticipated continued success of these students, RCF-N hopes to broaden and deepen our relationship with the Health Science Center.”

School and India’s Tata Institute Engage in Joint Immersion Program

Disadvantage communities across the world face many similar issues, from rampant poverty of their residents, to lack of clean water, reliable food sources, and quality health care. From the slums of Mumbia, India to the colonias along the U.S. Texas/Mexico border, the challenges may vary while solutions may be more similar than you think.

“In our country, people are just trying to survive day by day. Here in the U.S., it’s not just about surviving, it’s about raising the quality of life,” said Dr. Huda Mistry, a student from India participating in the program.

Recently, faculty and students of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai, India participated in an immersion program at the McAllen, Texas campus. The visitors from the Tata Institute were able to see first hand some of the public health services the Rio Grande Valley offers to address the needs of their underserved communities.

“The quality of life in the U.S. and how it differs from India is that you place such value on each individual person,” said Dr. Huda Mistry, a student from India participating in the program. “In our country, people are just trying to survive day by day. Here in the U.S., it’s not just about surviving, it’s about raising the quality of life.”

Learning about Chinese Public Health Issues Firsthand

Under the direction of Yan Hong, Ph. D., associate professor, a group of graduate students completed a study abroad program in China. This course was designed for students with a strong interest in global health and allowed for a firsthand look at public health systems in China. Students attended lectures delivered by faculty at the Nanjing Medical University, visited various area public health agencies and organizations, as well as sites of historical, economic, and cultural significance to the people of China.

See the video the students made of their experiences on YouTube using the URL below or the QR code to the right.

http://ow.ly/wba2s
Master of Health Administration Program receives National Award

The American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE) professional society recently awarded the Master of Health Administration (M.H.A.) program the 2014 Higher Education Network Award. This award recognizes the leading graduate program for its engagement with ACHE, its commitment to its communities, and its dedication to professional development of its students and graduates.

The ACHE is an international professional society of more than 40,000 healthcare executives who lead hospitals, healthcare systems and other healthcare organizations. The award was presented during ACHE’s 57th Congress on Healthcare Leadership in Chicago, Illinois.

“For us as a relatively young graduate health administration program to receive this award is a wonderful recognition of the hard work that our faculty and staff, our executive in residence, and our students and graduates put forward to ensure that we are consistently delivering a high quality and relevant masters degree,” said Murray Côté, Ph.D., associate professor and director of the M.H.A. program.

Public Health Matters Videos

The school has developed public service announcements (PSAs) targeting the general population with practical public health tips. These “Public Health Matters” videos can be found on the school’s YouTube site.

“The videos serve to highlight faculty experts and their research as well as define in practical terms what public health is,” states Rae Lynn Mitchell, M.A., director of communications.

Videos are added regularly and include such topics as What Fish to Eat when Pregnant; Avoiding Asthma Triggers (Spanish and English versions available); Computer use Ergonomics; and How to have a Healthy Pregnancy. To view available videos, scan the QR code or go to http://ow.ly/wba8C.

School awarded CEO Cancer Gold Standard Accreditation

The school was recently awarded the CEO Cancer Gold Standard™ accreditation by the CEO Roundtable on Cancer for its efforts to reduce the risk of cancer for its employees and their families. The CEO Roundtable on Cancer, a nonprofit organization of CEOs founded by former President George H.W. Bush, created the CEO Cancer Gold Standard in collaboration with the National Cancer Institute.

To earn Gold Standard accreditation, an organization must establish programs to reduce cancer risk by discouraging tobacco use; encouraging physical activity; promoting healthy diet and nutrition; detecting cancer at its earliest stages; and providing access to quality care, including participation in clinical trials. The Gold Standard calls for organizations to evaluate their health benefits and corporate culture and take extensive, concrete actions in five key areas of health and wellness to reduce the risk of cancer in the workplace.

“Much progress has already been made with the installation of filtered water stations, purchase of a refrigerator that can provide students with a place to store healthy foods, adding new fitness machines to the onsite exercise facility, and mapping walkable areas within and outside of the school boundaries,” said Dr. Marcia Ory, chairperson of the newly established Health and Wellness Committee. “Additionally, through the use of email, social media and new digital imaging monitors throughout the campuses, the school has been able to disseminate information related to cancer awareness and education including cancer screening and cancer clinical trials, healthy travel tips, and holiday nutrition.”

In fact, a school-wide survey for assessing current activities and tracking progress toward a healthier workplace has been instituted.

“This survey has helped us identify areas and strategies for improvement, and will help us develop a Healthy Workplace Toolkit that can be used in other workplaces locally and throughout the state,” said Dr. Samuel Towne, assistant professor.
Public Health Educational Affiliation Renewed with U.S. Army Medical Department Center

Due to the changing nature and challenges our military personnel are facing related to public health around the world, the U.S. Army Medical Department Center and School (AMEDDC&S) has developed an educational public health affiliation with the school.

For the past five years, the school has worked with the Department of Preventive Health Services to develop an educational affiliation that awards graduate degree credits to select Department of the Army officers and civilians for a Military Preventive Medicine Program of Instruction. The program, funded by the Department of Defense, was renewed recently for an additional five years through 2018.

Based at Fort Sam Houston near San Antonio, Texas, the AMEDDC&S provides all public health and preventive medicine training to the U.S. Army. This continuing agreement with the school allows military students to earn 12 graduate-level college credits that can be used toward the completion of a Master of Public Health (M.P.H.) degree.

"This has been an outstanding program and we have developed a great relationship with the School of Public Health over the past five years," states Col. Mustapha Deb-boun, director of the Department of Preventive Health Services at Fort Sam Houston. "It is our hope that this program will continue for a long time."

While the Army training is tailored to military populations, the collaboration and affiliation with the school lays a foundation of core public health knowledge that may be translated into any setting. Students learn the latest in core public health skills, including health policy and management, epidemiology and biostatistics, environmental and occupational health, industrial hygiene, health promotion, community health, preventive medicine and public health sciences.

"The affiliation of our school and the AMEDDC&S represents a collaborative vision that provides the Army with an accredited public health professions curriculum and an opportunity for joint research endeavors with a major health-related academic and research institution," states Antonio Rene, senior associate academic affairs dean. "The collaboration of Army, Navy and Air Force medical training centers at the AMEDDC&S as part of the military’s Joint Medical Training Center will also serve to strengthen the relationship with our school."

Building a Sustainable Community One Garden at a Time

Over the last 45 years, the effects of air and water pollution on the planet have become a major public health concern. According to Earthday.org, more than half of the world’s population lives in cities and metropolitan areas. As urban populations continue to grow, identifying efficient renewable energy sources and creating sustainable environments becomes critical to the survival of our planet.

In an effort to increase sustainability in the Brazos Valley, two graduate students from the school have worked closely with several faculty members to form the Environmental Sustainability Group, a new student organization. Graduate students Natalie Nagy, president of the organization, and Chelsea Stewart have worked closely with Natalie Johnson, Ph.D., assistant professor in the environmental and occupational health department, to increase student and campus-wide participation creating a healthy and sustainable living environment.

"This organization promotes healthy living through the implementation of various sustainability practices and conservation initiatives," said Nagy. "Over the last year the School of Public Health has worked to promote healthy living and sustainability through campus additions such as the installation of recycling bins, rainwater harvesting, the addition of filtered watering stations, and the development of several demonstrated gardens with the help of the HSC’s Healthy Gardens project."

The Healthy Gardens project is a community garden developed and managed by students, staff, and community volunteers. The project includes students from the School of Public Health, the College of Nursing, and the College of Medicine. The students developed a green house for the Bryan campus and installed numerous flower beds where they are growing various plants and vegetables.

"We have plans to install additional gardens at both the College Station and McAllen campuses for the School of Public Health," said Clay D. Hanks, Ph.D., director of campus operations at Texas A&M Health Science Center (TAMHSC). "Over the next two years our goal is to have Healthy Gardens activities on all TAMHSC campuses across the state."

"This project will hopefully grow to include individuals from all across TAMHSC that want to volunteer their time," said Nagy. "The main idea being that individuals from different schools can have a bed to ‘call their own’ and participate in contributing to the garden that represents their school."

By educating our students, staff, and faculty on sustainability and the many ways they can improve their environment, these projects provide an opportunity for TAMHSC to educate the entire community on the importance of conserving resources. These practices will demonstrate how others can create sustainable environments from their own backyard.

"We are so excited to be partnering with others in the HSC to promote sustainability," said Johnson. "As more individuals join this effort, this will hopefully be the start to many more projects together."
Students Research selected by Delta Omega National Honorary Society

Three research posters by students from our school were selected for the Delta Omega National Honorary Society research poster presentation at the 2013 American Public Health Association (APHA) annual meeting in Boston. A total of 19 research posters were chosen nationwide for this distinction.

The posters selected included “Assessment of Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behavior Following a Pesticide Education Intervention in Webb County, Texas” by Jennifer Ross, M.S., which discusses how pesticide related health education interventions may lead to lasting knowledge increases among participants. It also highlights how these interventions can have a persistent impact on the attitudes and behaviors of participants.

In addition, Niel Dalal, M.B.B.S., presented “Sex Related Differences in Cigarette Smoking Disclosure and Serum Cotinine Levels.” His study details why cigarette smoking is not an accurate measure of tobacco exposure. Dalal finds that undisclosed smoking status was significantly higher in male smokers than female smokers. He also reports that sex related differences exist in serum cotinine levels among smokers suggesting that self-reports may overestimate the tobacco exposure and risk of associated diseases in women compared with men.

Chinedum Ojinnaka, M.B.B.S., presented “Factors associated with self-reported barriers to colonoscopy among low-income/underserved patients in a family medicine setting.” Ojinnaka reported on how patients receiving a colonoscopy at the Texas A&M Family Medicine Clinic through Texas C-STEP, a CPRIT-funded colorectal cancer prevention program, identified barriers that prevented them from obtaining a colorectal cancer screening. She highlights that embarrassment, lack of knowledge, and fear of finding cancer may contribute to inadequate colorectal cancer screening rates.

Students honored by HP’s Women’s Innovation Council

HP partnered with Texas A&M University and Geeks Without Bounds, an accelerator for humanitarian projects, to host a code-a-thon with the challenge to create an application to help manage people’s health. The event, “Hack for Health,” was open to all Texas A&M students.

The winning team developed “Baby Allergy Journal,” a user-friendly website that helps parents manage their children’s allergies electronically and record symptoms, triggers and treatments. The team was made up of three students: Szu Wei Wang a computer science masters student; Szu Hsuan Lin, a doctoral candidate at the School of Public Health, and Mu-Fen Miller and James Stafford.

The winning team was awarded an all-expense paid trip to San Francisco where the team showcased its website.

Adepoju Double Winner at APHA Annual Meeting

Omolola Adepoju, a recent doctoral graduate, was selected as a winner in both the Medical Care Student Session and in the Epidemiology Session at the 2013 American Public Health Association (APHA) annual meeting.

Adepoju presented her abstract, “Effects of diabetes self-management programs on time-to-hospitalization among patients with Type II diabetes: A survival analysis model,” during the Medical Care Student Session in Boston.

Adepoju’s work, which is included in her doctoral dissertation, stems from a National Institutes of Health (NIH) P20 subproject, “Employing Diabetes Self-Management Models to Reduce Health Disparities in Texas.” It was one of three NIH-funded projects under the “Program for Rural and Minority Health Disparities Research” P20 grant.

She was also chosen by the Epidemiology Section of APHA as a student award winner for her abstract, “Projection of the growth of prevalence of diabetes in children through 2030.”

Doctoral Candidate wins National Ergo Award

Meghan Kress, a doctoral candidate, was selected as the recipient of the Applied Ergonomics Creativeness in Ergonomics, Student of the Year Award. This national competition is conducted by the Institute of Industrial Engineers. The award recognized Ms. Kress’ work in ergonomics including original research, industry assessment, and product development.

In three of the past five years, Texas A&M School of Public Health students have received this national recognition. Previous winners are Kristen Miller and James Stafford.

The $4,000 award is sponsored by CNA Insurance Co. and was presented to Ms. Kress during the 17th Annual Applied Ergonomics Conference in Orlando, Florida.

Appiah presents at World Health Summit 2013

Bernard Appiah, a recent doctoral graduate, presented at the World Health Summit 2013 in Berlin, Germany. Mr. Appiah’s research is titled “Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Culturally Relevant Communication Interventions to Promote Voluntary Blood Donations in Africa: A Case Study for Ghana.”

His research has published in The Lancet, considered one of the world’s leading medical journals. Appiah’s presentation forms part of The Lancet session at the World Health Summit titled ‘New Voices in Global Health,’ which highlights important research, policy, and advocacy initiatives.

Of the 122 abstracts submitted from 29 countries for this session, five were chosen for oral presentation and 13 for poster presentation.
If it is true that management is doing things right, and leadership is doing the right things, then the Founding Chair of the Development Council for the school, Phillip D. Robinson ’78, is a stellar example of both.

In his current role as President of Lankenau Medical Center, which recently underwent a half a billion dollar expansion with the opening of their new Heart Pavilion, a five-story, 274,000-square-foot facility that delivers world-class medical care to its region, Robinson’s leadership has led the hospital to be named as one of Truven Health Analytics Top 50 Cardiac Hospitals and a “Top Performer on Key Measures” by the Joint Commission. This, coupled with his experience as the CEO of JFK Medical Center in Florida during the first anthrax exposure three weeks following 9/11, positions Mr. Robinson as one of the most outstanding Aggie healthcare leaders of our time.

His most recent endeavor was co-editing Anticipate, Respond, Recover: Healthcare Leadership and Catastrophic Events, which focuses on disaster preparedness and response from the healthcare leader’s perspective. In the book dedication, Robinson states: “Partial proceeds from this book will be donated to the School of Public Health at the Texas A&M Health Science Center to assist in the development of the future leaders and public health professionals who will be integral to our response to the critical challenges yet to come.”

Through the years Robinson has donated to help establish one of the school’s first endowed scholarship funds, established the first planned gift to the school, and the first donor/student scholarship program. He has also served on the school’s Master of Health Administration Advisory Board.

Robinson is sure that “if this outstanding graduate school had been in place when I attended Texas A&M, there is no doubt in my mind I would have furthered my education here.”

In 2004, Parth Shah, M.D., was having difficulty paying his tuition at the school where he was pursuing a master in public health degree. Dr. Marcia Ory heard of his student’s difficulty and funded a scholarship to help him. Dr. Shah never forgot Ory’s generosity and as a result, decided to fund a similar scholarship at the school.

Ory and her husband, Raymond Carroll, Ph.D., have since established the first endowed scholarship for healthy aging.

“Dr. Shah’s desire to fund a scholarship similar to what I was able to do for him years ago motivated me to establish an endowed scholarship, which will benefit students for years to come,” states Ory. “A nice chain reaction - building public health professionals one link at a time.”

The scholarship will be given annually to a student involved in promoting research and practice to improve the lives of the growing population of older adults in Texas.

“My husband and I are making this contribution in recognition of our parents who taught us many of the secrets of successful aging,” Ory said. “Public health interventions can help ensure that the added years experienced by most older adults are quality years.”
Each year at commencement faculty and staff surprise graduates with applause as they exit the auditorium.