
2
2
2
2

MAKING OURSELVES HEARD

A science storytelling class with Columbia Journalism School. A Health Policy and Management panel featuring the aide who spearheaded President Biden's COVID-19 messaging. A contest to encourage creative communication strategies for public health professionals. These are just a few of the ways students and faculty are getting the word out about public health.

By Christina Hernandez Sherwood
Illustration by David Cooper

There is no denying it:

Today's information landscape is punctuated by an increased mistrust of science, a partisan political climate, and a cacophony of social media voices. Public health experts must shout—strategically—in order to be heard.

This has led to expanded interest in a skill that Columbia Mailman School has long emphasized: public health communication—that is, the act of conveying public health information not only to peers, but also to society at large.

Public health professionals are realizing they need to change the way they think about this key skill. "Public health is largely invisible until there's a crisis. When the crisis recedes, the public health workforce fades into the background," says Michael Sparer, JD, PhD, chair of Health Policy and Management. "We haven't effectively communicated how public health makes life better for all of us, all of the time."

Teaming Up With Traditional Media

Over the last year, faculty members have contributed to mainstream media outlets in growing numbers, publishing a host of articles and opinion pieces on a range of public health topics. The School's public health professionals have long worked to effectively translate their research into practical lessons and health policy suggestions, Sparer says. But the onslaught of misinformation surrounding the pandemic has amplified interest in communicating effectively. "More researchers are figuring out how to reach audiences that are not going to pick up the *New England Journal of Medicine*, but who might watch Fox News," says Sparer. The School's Communications office has seen a significant uptick in news articles and faculty op-eds published in top-tier mainstream outlets, notes Vanita Gowda, MPA, associate dean and chief communications officer. "Our School is a leading media source due in part to our educational focus on health communication. But our location in New York City—a media hub—and our faculty's efforts to make public health knowledge and evidence as widely accessible as possible are also critical," she says.

The interest in health communication also inspired a new class: When longtime friends Julie Herbstman, PhD, professor of Environmental Health Sciences and director of the Columbia Center for Children's Environmental Health, and Duy Linh Tu, dean of academic affairs and professor of professional practice at Columbia Journalism School, shared a meal a few years ago, the conversation soon turned to work. While chatting about their respective challenges—Tu as a science journalist in a rapidly evolving field and Herbstman as a researcher trying to communicate her science without formal training in communication—they realized they could help each other. "There is a perception that scientists and journalists have an adversarial relationship," Herbstman says. "It doesn't need to be that way. We need each other, but we don't work together very well."

Spurred by (now former) Columbia University Provost Mary C. Boyce's call for interdisciplinary course proposals, Herbstman and Tu, who met as undergraduates at Tufts University, began to develop a class that would, Herbstman says, "bridge the gap between scientific research and the distribution of important health information to the public." The course, The Scientist and the Storyteller, demystifies public health research and journalism, emphasizing that the two can share the same goal: to bring science to the public.

During sessions in the Columbia Journalism School "World Room" where the Pulitzer Prizes are announced each spring, Herbstman and Tu helped a cohort of students (those studying public health and those with a journalism focus) to understand the differences, and similarities, in the two fields. "What is the role of an editor versus the role of a peer reviewer?" Herbstman says. "How is grant writing different from pitching in a journalistic setting?"

Herbstman, who explained the life cycle of a research study for the students in the class, says the biggest difference between the fields is the time frame in which they work. "Journalists call me and they need information by this afternoon," Herbstman says. "But from an idea to a research paper can be five-plus

Over the last year, Columbia Mailman School faculty have taken on a remarkable range of topics and written for a wider audience than ever.

Read excerpts from their work.

On period education

"Losing your first tooth is a rite of passage for many children. But what if we never talked to them about this normal part of childhood? … Imagine if, instead of rewarding children with a dollar bill, our silence and stigma led them to hide this experience out of embarrassment. … This lack of knowledge, insufficient support, and feeling of shame are exactly what many people experience when it comes to periods."

MARNI SOMMER, DrPH '08, MSN, RN, professor of Sociomedical Sciences, and co-author Joanne Armstrong, MD, MPH, in *Fortune*

years. How do you make that newsworthy today?"

By the end of the course, each student had written a journalistic story about a scientific article, working with editors from *Scientific American* and *Forbes* to polish the pieces as if for publication. Herbstman says she hopes the course inspires future public health professionals to work with journalists to communicate their research. "Otherwise, the impact of our work is limited to the handful of people who are on PubMed," a massive database of scientific literature.

Herbstman talked about the course as a member of a panel on bridging the gap between scientific information and public understanding held as part of the Health Policy and Management Healthcare Conference last April, another sign of the School's vigorous interest in this topic. Moderated by Robert Shepardson, senior lecturer in Health Policy and Management and co-founder of the advertising agency SS+K, the session also featured Kevin Munoz, assistant press secretary at the White House.

During the panel, Munoz emphasized how today's "deeply fragmented media environment" called for meeting people where they are to communicate valuable health information. "You need to be in the tabloids. You need to be

On the value of online degrees

"Graduates of for-profit institutions … are not achieving the same labor market outcomes as their counterparts from more traditional colleges and universities [even though] their institutions were held to the same academic accreditation standards. With this in mind, the next time your admissions or hiring committee excludes or scoffs at applicants with online degrees, think twice."

ROXANNE RUSSELL, PhD, adjunct assistant professor of Health Policy and Management, in *Inside Higher Ed*

on TikTok, Instagram. All of these are going to play a role in how you communicate about public health issues," he said.

Communicating Across Channels

For a long time, many public health professionals believed sharing their work meant talking about their scientific findings with graphs, data, and statistics, but without interpretation. "They would assume that public health information could speak for itself," says Gina Wingood, ScD, MPH, the Sidney and Helaine Lerner Professor of Public Health Promotion in Sociomedical Sciences, director of the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion, and director of the Health Communications Certificate. But if the COVID-19 pandemic left public health professionals with one lesson about communication, Wingood says, it's that the public needs help interpreting scientific findings (not to mention parsing jargon).

An example of COVID-19 communication done right: the wildly successful Dear Pandemic, a social media campaign co-founded by Sandra Albrecht, PhD, assistant professor of Epidemiology, to combat misinformation about COVID-19. Albrecht was part of an interdisciplinary team of researchers and clinicians who took to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram in the early days of the pandemic to deliver factual information in nonpartisan, accessible language for the public.

A winning formula for public health communications, Wingood says, includes using messages from trusted messengers that address social determinants of health, appeal to the reader's emotions, and include visuals that tell the story—and reaching out across a diverse array of communication channels. For instance, she says, information for older adults could use compelling narratives directly from older adults. "There's no monolithic audience who's going to respond in the same way," Wingood says. "Public health messages need to be framed for diverse audiences. Health literacy is another underestimated problem. Messages should use nontechnical language and aim to motivate a single action rather than a lifestyle change. Health literacy is a cornerstone of messages

On climate and health

"The implications of climate change on HIV health outcomes have not historically been made obvious, but as an international development community, we are beginning to see the range of risk behaviors associated with climate change impacts, especially among women. We have a responsibility to establish programming that reflects what we know."

ANDREA LOW, MD, PhD, adjunct assistant professor of Epidemiology in ICAP, in *The Hill*

On weighing costs

"If you were to go to buy a $1 chocolate bar but were told it would actually cost $6, you would probably complain about the $5 difference and refuse to pay it. But if you were buying an airline ticket priced at $250 that turned out to cost $255, you would be more likely to proceed. This illustrates the widespread and influential phenomenon of 'mental accounting,' which helps explain why individuals, institutions, and societies perceive the value of money as relative to its origin and purpose."

KAI RUGGERI, PhD, professor of Health Policy and Management, in the *Financial Times*

On a sense of purpose

"Research shows that having more sense of purpose in life, and of control over one's life and health (a so-called internal locus of control), are associated with better physical health, including less disease, pain, strokes, dementia, and Alzheimer's. Yet, while many people find such purpose through reliance on faith and traditional religions … it can consist of social and political ideals as well."

ROBERT KLITZMAN, MD, professor of psychiatry in Sociomedical Sciences, in *Psychology Today*

created by the Lerner Center's founder, the late Sid Lerner, an advertising-industry legend.

Columbia Mailman School students practice designing compelling health messages by competing in the Lerner Center's annual Health Messaging for Justice competition, which challenges students to create products that reduce stigma, enhance social justice, and counteract racism. This year's submissions spanned communication products ranging from a documentary on transforming spaces for accessibility, to a "get to know you" card game for new sexual partners.

The student competitors, who came from across departments, were scored on messaging, creativity, design, and dissemination strategy, topics frequently covered in their coursework, Wingood says. The winning submission came from Jazmyne Bullock, Courtney George, Ugomma Korie, and Megan Spinella (all '25); their submission, *Health, Happiness, and Life: A Guide for Expectant Black Mothers in NYC*, is a free podcast that melds personal stories with expert interviews. The student winners "were excellent at integrating issues of health literacy and tailoring their podcast to the audience of African American women," Wingood says.

Students can study health communications in single courses or through the Health Communication Certificate, where they learn about mobile health, email marketing, data visualization, and infographics, and how to tackle misinformation. Graduates of the program, which offers extensive exposure to health communications experts across New York City, have gone on to careers in city and national health departments, in the media, and at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as at digital communication agencies, healthcare companies, and nonprofits.

Health communication courses include the long-running Writing for Publication in Health Policy and Management, which was recently taught by Maria Smilios, author of *The Black Angels: The Untold Story of the Nurses Who Helped Cure Tuberculosis*. Every full-time Health Policy and Management student takes a professional development course called PIVOT that helps them learn to communicate about their work through mock interviews and simulated conversations. "Everybody's searching for different ways of communicating with different audiences," says Sparer. "There's much greater attention being paid now, among academics, to how to more effectively reach the consumers you want to reach." ●

On racism in drug policy

"At face value, New York's Good Samaritan law seems like an important step towards harm reduction; however, upon closer examination, it simply masks an ongoing mandate to criminalize drug users."

JOHN PAMPLIN II, MPH '14, PhD '20, assistant professor of Epidemiology, on Thirteen.org

Christina Hernandez Sherwood *specializes in journalistic storytelling. See more at christinahernandezsherwood.com. Additional reporting by Neha Kumar, MHA '24.*