

## The Director's Column

Dr. Nils Hennig, Program Director



### Welcome to this new issue of the Scoop.

Listening to our students describing their experiences during the Public Health Practicum Showcase, and reading these articles reminds me what a privilege it is to serve as the Director of the Graduate Program in Public Health. Our students and faculty continue to team up to achieve major advances in public health by implementing and evaluating evidence-informed policies and programs.

As if we would need a reminder for the necessity for public health action, according to the National Center for Health Statistics of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention life expectancy in the United States continues to fall. A core driver is the ongoing epidemic

of drug overdose. The statistics about the opioid crisis in the United States are startling: more Americans die each year from opioid overdoses than have died in any armed conflict since the end of World War II. On average, 130 Americans die each day from an opioid overdose; overdose is now the leading cause of unintentional injury death in the United States, surpassing motor vehicle deaths.

Alarmed by these statistics and knowing that the public health profession has a responsibility to address this crisis, the Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health (ASPPH)

*The opioid crisis is a public health issue that touches all levels of society and must be addressed across sectors.*

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## Liberate the Mind and Walk with Pride

By Debjyoti Datta, MPH Student in the Global Health Track, and Shivani Rathi, MPH Student in the Epidemiology Track



**Photo:** Amidst a focus group discussion with the hijra/kinnar/transgender community members

India is now included among the countries where homosexuality is not criminalized and alternative gender is recognized in the constitution. Has socio-cultural acceptance followed legal acceptance? What role has this played in mental health care among the LGBT community? These questions took us on a journey to rediscovering India with a new lens. The 2019 Global Health Summer Experience not only gave us an opportunity to find out how Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, affect resilience in LGBT populations but also took us through the daily lives and mental health care accessibility of the transgender and Hijra communities of Gujarat, India.

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## Liberate the Mind and Walk with Pride *(continued from page 1)*

Two months in Gujarat gave us every experience of a global health project in a nutshell crash course. Over years of oppression, the LGBT community of Gujarat has learned to live in the closet, and so it was a challenge to contact the community, gain their confidence, and engage individuals in our study on ACEs. This was one of many obstacles we had to overcome, and it took skills that we could never have learned in any textbooks. Every day gave us glimpses of the kind of personal closet individuals made for themselves, and even though the much awaited legal acceptance has arrived, social acceptance is nowhere close to making lives easier for community members. The majority of the LGBT individuals we spoke to lived dual lives pretending to be heteronormative, and this constant dilemma caused them immense stress and anxiety for which they could not seek help for due to lack of awareness among society and mental health care providers. Fortunately, we also met a marginalized group, shunned by society, called 'Hijra'/'Kinnar' community, a group of transgender people with a very different cultural set up compared to the rest of society.

We wanted to have the focus group discussions in a place where the 'Kinnars' would feel safe, motivated and comfortable to open up to us, as opposed to calling them to our offices. We travelled to different cities to meet the 'Kinnars' in groups and congregations where



**Photo:** Annual celebration with Lakshya Trust, a community based organization advocating for all aspects of health for sexual minorities in Gujarat, India.

they lived. This was nothing short of a life changing experience: to hear them out, sympathize, and empathize with them. In every discussion we were taken on a journey through the life struggles and successes, including individuals' need for mental health care providers attuned to their life experience. They brought to light the need for a more inclusive health care environment, which can only result from increasing awareness and acceptance.

Overall, it was a great practical, hands-on learning experience. We learned skills that we will forever cherish in our careers in global mental health.

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## Community Outreach in Jinja, Uganda

*By Jezelle Lynch, MPH Student in the Epidemiology Track and Chinasa Ekweremuba, MPH Student in the Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Track*

Our Global Health Summer Experience was memorable because we were able to participate in two projects during our short time in Jinja, Uganda: malaria prevention research and work in the Soft Power Health Clinic founded by Dr. Jessie Stone.

We were part of the last year of a five-year cross-sectional study on malaria education and prevention through community outreach in 11 nearby villages. In collaboration with a translator and a village health worker, we administered 2600 household surveys asking about demographic, knowledge, and attitude-based questions. After administering each survey, we asked for permission to observe the condition of their long-lasting insecticide treated bed net and recorded our observations. The data we collected will help determine which villages need the most assistance, if malaria prevalence decreased due to the distribution of free government and subsidized bed nets over the past years



**Photo:** On the road conducting household surveys in villages near Jinja, Uganda. From the left: Jezelle Lynch and Chinasa Ekweremuba

and local's knowledge and attitudes in regard to malaria and prevention.

In the Soft Power Health Clinic, we worked in the lab and participated in various outreach activities such as subsidized bed net sales, family planning, and nutrition education. We appreciated that our preceptor felt it was important to participate in various health

programs, and it was quite rewarding. Our favorite program was family planning.

Outside of work, we spent time at our host family's house, touring Uganda's towns and capital, and making friends with the locals. Our favorite activity was spending time with our neighbors and their kids who would come to our compound every day to play, listen to music, or dance. The children we met take on so many responsibilities at a young age, such as, washing, cooking, and caring for younger siblings, that it was sometimes hard to believe that they were still children. They showed us that they are full of life, laughter, and love, and we saw how the collectivist community takes care of one another. At the end of our stay we threw a party for all the local kids, and while it was stressful to plan and cook with firewood, the event turned out amazingly well and all the kids enjoyed it. It brought great satisfaction to our hearts knowing that we were able to serve the community and put a smile on the children's faces.

# Public Health Grand Rounds

## US Mexico Border: Considerations for Health and Healthcare Delivery

On October 22, 2019, Gail Emrick, MPH, shared priorities for border healthcare from her perspective as the Executive Director of the Southeast Arizona Area Health Education Center (SEAHEC), a health workforce development agency serving rural, tribal and border communities and health service agencies in the U.S. Mexico border region.

Listening to Gail speak about border health and her work at SEAHEC brought to light how little the



general population knows about the challenges migrants face each day. In order to understand a more complete story of immigration to the US, Gail described how historic US intervention in areas like Central America and parts of Asia contributed to instability and increased migration, and the effects of the current US immigration deterrence policies. Given deterrence policies, people are still choosing to migrate, but are now taking more dangerous paths to the border, causing an increase in serious health issues. Gail's presentation was incredibly thought-provoking and inspired me to learn more about immigration and border health.

**- Meghan Smith, MPH Student in the Global Health Track**

## Mental Health in the Dominican Republic

By Jennifer Trabucco, MPH Student in the Global Health Track

Studying abroad is an incredible experience for any public health or medical student. It opened my eyes to new walks of life and an abundance of culture. I was fortunate to be selected for the project in the Dominican Republic. Not only did my partner and I learn about the community's outlook and knowledge about mental health, but we learned that it is a topic that many people want to know more about in order to care for their fellow community members. This demonstrated how much the local community valued helping one another. My experience was not only inspiring, but humbling, heartwarming, and has sparked the utmost passion for my future career. I absolutely cannot wait to work more with the INTEP Clinic.



**Photo:** From the left: Jennifer Trabucco and Xiomara Fernandez, MD, at the newly opened INTEP mental health clinic in Jarabacoa, DR.

## The Director's Column *(continued from page 1)*

assembled an expert Task Force in late 2018. After many months of research, consultation, and discussion, the Task Force has compiled the comprehensive set of recommendations. These recommendations rest on the foundational beliefs that the opioid crisis is a public health issue that touches all levels of society and must be addressed across sectors; that opioid use disorder is a chronic, relapsing brain disease; that inappropriate use of opioids leading to addiction was driven by corporate and personal greed; and that evidence-based public health approaches can reduce the harms of this epidemic and help bring it to an end. If a master settlement agreement is reached in the multi-district litigation currently pending, funds should be used not only to compensate states and communities for expenditures related to the epidemic, but also to prevent it from spreading, ameliorate associated harms, and contain related syndemics (synergistic epidemics of two or

more conditions with related underlying causes). ASPPH published and released the report titled "Bringing Science to Bear on Opioids" and recommendations on November 1, 2019. It has been distributed to all state attorneys general and to more than 1,800 lawyers of record in the 2,600+ federal lawsuits against opioid manufacturers, distributors and retailers. A dedicated ASPPH web page on the report features a recorded webinar on the report as well as summary slides. I recommend it as a great resource for everybody interested in the issue: <https://www.aspph.org/opioids/>.

I strongly believe that these recommendations, if implemented and adequately resourced, will help advance the treatment of people currently suffering from opioid use disorder, greatly reduce the number of citizens misusing opioids in the future, and begin to heal communities devastated by the opioid crisis.

# Public Health Practicum Showcase

The Public Health Practicum Showcase is an opportunity for preceptors, faculty, students, and other community members to explore the various projects and practice experiences undertaken by MPH students at ISMMS. This year's showcase took place on October 29, 2019, and featured projects on injury prevention, measles outbreak response, strategic planning, youth engagement, project collaborations with the Indian Health Service in New Mexico, mental illness and substance abuse, malaria prevention in Uganda, and mental health care among LGBT communities in India. The showcase fostered an exciting space for learning for all attendees!



**Photo:** Chinasa Ekweremuba and Jezelle Lynch present on a study of malaria education and outreach.



**Photo:** Presenters and Manager of Public Health Practice Christine Cortalano, MPH, CHES, celebrate the event. From the left: Nisha Chowdhury, Katherine Maguire, Jezelle Lynch, Chinasa Ekweremuba, Stacey Pinto, Sonia Lazreg, Christine Cortalano, Rui Jiang, Debjyoti Datta, Gabrielle Sweeney, Vibhor Mahajan, and Shivani Rathi.

## Students Who Rocked Public Health 2019

The editors of the *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice* have selected three MPH students for recognition in their annual review Students Who Rocked Public Health! Their projects will be highlighted in upcoming issues of JPHMP Direct online.

**Debjyoti Datta and Shivani Rathi** conducted both research and advocacy work regarding mental health and mental health services for the LGBT community in Gujarat, India, with a specific focus on the transgender, Hijra, and Kinnar communities. They collaborated with two organizations to document transgender community experiences with stress, mental illness, and seeking mental health services, and the effect (if any) of the 2014 Transgender Persons Bill. The team also produced a video describing the struggles that transgender individuals encounter, including stress, violence and discrimination, but also highlighting the successes transgender individuals have had with finding community, supportive organizations, and paving their own pathway to employment. This project was selected for recognition because it tackles long-standing rights issues for the LGBT population and amplifies the voices of transgender people to inform future programming and policy change to better serve the needs of these communities.

**Sonia Lazreg** collaborated with the Zuni Indian Health Services (IHS) in Zuni, New Mexico to investigate their suspicion that women treated at the Health Center experience significantly higher rates of gestational diabetes, gestational hypertension, and preeclampsia compared to national data. The results from Sonia's chart review provided the evidence necessary for the Hospital Executive Committee and Tribal Council to begin planning potential interventions and studies to test improved protocols for treating obstetrics patients in their community. This project was selected for recognition because it sheds more light on health disparities for women of color in the US, especially focusing on Native American communities. The project also strengthens ability of Native American clinicians and female investigators to participate in the development of clinical protocols and scientific publishing, where Native American voices have been historically underrepresented.

# Effective Communication in Public Health: The Second Annual Professional Development Conference

The Annual Professional Development Conference took place on November 1, 2019. The keynote address *Why me? Why now? Why Health Communication Matters* was presented by Paula Croxson, MS, MSc, PhD, Senior Producer of *The Story Collider*. The panel discussion on new media and public health featured Attia Taylor, Founder and Editor-in-Chief of *Womanly Magazine*, and Katie Ullman, Senior Media Specialist for Mount Sinai Health System. Roundtable sessions included topics such as bias in health communications, working at the Healthcare Innovation and Technology Lab, the MSHS Administrative Fellowship, networking, salary negotiations, and more.

The Public Health Professional Development Conference offered many great opportunities for me as an alumnus of the program. The keynote address emphasized storytelling as a compelling and motivating tool for health communications. I also had the space and time to network and get to know my peers and others. I spoke with the guest panelists, students, and other professionals.

- **Cristina Gallo, MPH, 2017 Alumnus of the Graduate Program in Public Health at ISMMS**



**Photo:** From the left: Panelists Paula Croxson, Katie Ullman, and Attia Taylor describing their careers in health and digital communications and the stories of how they became involved in new media, respectively, *The Story Collider*, *The Road to Resilience Podcast*, and *Womanly Magazine*.



**Photo:** Keynote Speaker Paula Croxson, MS, MSc, PhD, described survey research on the low level of trust people place in the sciences and in medical professionals, the importance of listening to people's concerns and current understanding of a health topic, and the need for all health professionals to communicate science and health information to children, families, and community members.



**Photo:** Current students and conference attendees engage with invited roundtable facilitators on several topics related to career development and current topics in the field. From the left: Carole Commodore and Shanell Morrison.

## Couldn't attend in person?

Recordings of the lecture and panel are available on the Blackboard Learning Management System!

# The American Public Health Association Annual Meeting

The American Public Health Association is the largest membership organization representing the public health profession. Each year in November APHA hosts a meeting of nearly 13,000 members to share new research and trends in public health through oral presentations, poster presentations, roundtable discussions, and other new media and meeting styles. This year seven MPH students and alumni presented at APHA. Below are the reflections of a few attendees of the conference.

Walking into every presentation, I could immediately feel the immense amount of passion for public health present among all attendees. Regardless of credentials or level of experience, everyone was very approachable and willing to share their stories and insight. I was particularly surprised how commonplace it became to hold conversations with professionals of significant prestige in the public health world. **- Stacey Pinto, MPH Student in the Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Track**

One valuable idea I heard came from Dr. Mary Wooley, the President of Research!America, the largest not-for-profit grassroots organization committed to making health research a higher level national priority. On a panel about the role of populism in public health, she pointed out that as scientists, we are encouraged, and even trained, to be skeptical of what we know and are told. However, we are frustrated when the public is skeptical about the information we present and disseminate. She suggested that this contradictory framework is harmful in public health and argued that we should embrace, rather than reject, the public's questioning. **- Emily Spiera, MD-MPH Student in the General Public Health Track**



**Photo:** Current students taking advantage of the APHA 2019 photo station. From the left: Trevor Higginson, Emily Spiera, and Sara Kiani

APHA is truly about presenting the work that is being done, regardless of the age of the researcher or the background they come from. Going forward, I know this and will be submitting my own abstracts this upcoming year! **- Ramita Gowda, MPH Student in the Global Health Track**

The presentation at APHA helped me learn that public health professionals must be disruptively innovative, a concept first mentioned by Dr. Robert Redfield, the Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in relation to polio eradication. This phrase is a great reminder that we should not be waiting for a larger body to tell us what is important and where to implement change. Rather, we should identify issues and take initiative to address them on our own. **- Sara Kiani, MD-MPH Student in the General Public Health Track**

APHA was a great place to learn how to connect and network with various public health professionals. I even networked with those not directly in my field of interest, and the opportunity to talk with all of these people helped me understand career opportunities and how different professionals work together. **- Isaiah Brown, MPH Student in the Health Care Management Track**



**Photo:** Current students taking a break at the APHA networking lounge at the main conference center. From the left: Vibhor Mahajan, Chinasa Ekweremuba, Ramita Gowda, Jezelle Lynch, and Isaiah Brown.

# 8 Tips to Survive Your First Hackathon

By Miti Saksena, Master of Science in Clinical Research Student



**Photo:** Team Members: Stephen Romano, Thanh Thao Nguyen, Joan Storey, Tamanna Obyed, Miti Saksena and Vibhor Mahajan

The 4th annual Mount Sinai Health Hackathon was a 48-hour non-stop event held October 11-13, 2019. The theme was Artificial Intelligence, and the challenge was to create novel technology solutions for current problems in healthcare. We were tasked with defining a problem, devising a solution, and working out the logistics to deliver it in a viable business model. Although we didn't

win, we learned new concepts, worked with diverse people, made new friends, and most importantly, realized how even simple ideas in healthcare can make significant changes in a person's life.

1. **Prepare in advance:** A hackathon is an environment where you do almost everything "on-the-fly", but it is best to have an idea of what to build and what you are going to contribute to the team.

2. **Team up:** Teams average four or five people. Grab a couple of close friends!
3. **Be open to new people and ideas:** Too much preparation beforehand comes with the risk of being limited by your expectations. Some of our best ideas came from interactions with people we met at the event.
4. **Location:** You'll need to find a spot at the event where you will be spending all of your time, preferably close to the cafeteria!
5. **Delegate:** It is important to clearly define each person's tasks to maximize everyone's contributions.
6. **Time management:** Remember, a rule of thumb for any hackathon is that at any given point, you have too much time and you do not have enough time.
7. **Presentation:** Presentations are a designer's place to shine. Think of a Shark Tank-like pitch to help the judges understand the details of your brilliant idea!
8. **Practice:** Presenting 48 hours of work in three minutes might seem cruel, but the only way to succeed is to practice as many times as possible!

## Everyday Magic for Children and Families Living with Type 1 Diabetes

By Jennifer Trabucco, MPH Student in the Global Health Track

What happens when public health meets some of children's most beloved fantasy friends? In the words of Walt Disney himself, "magic." The Disney Corporation has decided to partner with Lilly's Diabetes branch to provide a wide variety of educational materials to children and families living with Type 1 diabetes. On their website [T1everydaymagic.com](http://T1everydaymagic.com), there are resources, like Disney-inspired cookbooks, and guides for parents and caregivers of children with Type 1 diabetes. The partnership is also leveraging ESPN and Hannah Montana to reach kids of all ages.

Beyond reinforcing diabetes management messages for families, Disney created a new Disney Junior character named Coco

the monkey, to give children and families a character to identify with and learn from. She is a fun-loving, energetic pal who sports a diabetes bracelet and checks her blood sugar levels before meals and after exercise. Disney has rolled out multiple physical and online books with Coco in many languages



**Photo:** Coco the monkey shows other Disney characters her diabetes medical alert identification bracelet.

for children across the globe. The main message? Children with Type 1 Diabetes can live normal, healthy lives and should not be discouraged from telling friends about their disease or participating in kid activities.

It is my hope that we continue to see mainstream childhood public health literature and media attention. In the future, I hope to see books that include Coco in libraries and bookstores, and more content featuring children with other chronic conditions as well. Stories could center on living with these conditions, but can also give characters reoccurring appearances, showing them participating in the normal life of all Disney characters, and providing children with consistent representation.

# Student Advice Column

By the MPH Student Council Representatives: Princess Sutherland, Dimitri Base, and Meghan Smith

## Q: What is your favorite part about the MPH degree program at ISMMS?

**Princess:** My favorite thing about the MPH program is not only how **passionate** many of the professors are in the classroom, but the amazing work they are doing outside of the classroom and the ideas they spark for us as students. Often, the projects I have worked in courses could be **directly put in action** in NYC communities. It is cool to see that what I'm studying/working on could be used in the future.

**Meghan:** I love the **small class sizes**. I really get to know the professors and other students. There are so many opportunities for guest lectures, networking events, and course advising, which all make me feel like I will be very prepared to enter the workforce upon graduation.

**Dimitri:** I enjoy the **diversity** of classes offered. As a student on the Health Care Management Track, I have taken courses related to management, business and policy, but also epidemiology and biostatistics. No matter the track, the MPH program boasts a **well-rounded curriculum** which is great for getting to know a little bit about everything.

## Q: What is some advice you would give to succeed in this program?

**Princess:** Get a planner or utilize your phone/computer calendar so that you can **stay on top of your assignments** and be organized throughout each term. Also, **keep in the loop** with current public health events and the work your professors/guest speakers are doing outside of the classroom. These topics and discussions can often spark ideas for your Applied Practice Experience or Culminating Experience, and even be inspirational as you decide what path you will take after graduation for your public health career.

**Dimitri:** If you are struggling in a certain class, don't be afraid to **meet with the TAs and the professor for help**. I would also urge students to **be proactive and reach out** to people for Applied Practice Experience opportunities. Fellow peers and professors can connect you with people they know, and you could find a great opportunity.

**Meghan:** As a first year student, I can already see that a way to succeed in this program is to **approach each class with the intention of learning**, and not so much about the grade. Each class teaches us, as future public health professionals, a certain skill set that we will likely use or see every single day in the field. Because of this, it is important to make sure you have a thorough understanding of the course content and are not just "learning" to get the course done. I think a huge way to learn as much as possible from each course is through **making connections** with fellow students who can support you, as well as connecting with the professors and TAs as everyone wants to help one another succeed!

To learn more about how to complete your MPH degree please see the Track Checklists, Curriculum Guide, Applied Practice Experience Guide, and Culminating Experience Guide, and more on Blackboard.

# ANNOUNCEMENTS

National Public Health Week is **April 6-12, 2020!** Join the NPHW Planning Committee to pitch ideas or lead our events! Please contact [jennifer.valdivia-espino@mssm.edu](mailto:jennifer.valdivia-espino@mssm.edu) for more information!

Public Health Research Day will be Thursday, May 28, 2020! Events include the annual poster session featuring all graduating students, select oral presentations, a keynote address, and a cocktail networking reception.

*Interested in having your writing or photos published in The Scoop? Be a part of our next issue! Contact one of our editors to get involved.*



Icahn School  
of Medicine at  
Mount  
Sinai

## The Scoop Fall 2019/Winter 2020

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