

Obstacles & Opportunities: Future for Public Health Students

By Janessa M. Graves

In 1997, Barry S. Levy, then-president of the American Public Health Association, presented nearly a dozen current or anticipated trends in public health, calling them “dangers and opportunities”—serious dangers for the health of the public, and serious opportunities for us to improve the health of the public. He described changes in financing and organization of health care, information and communications, biotechnology and genetics, and changes in the economy and population. Levy wrote that while “we have the capabilities to create the future we want in our society.... [we] need to understand some major trends that are occurring and will continue to occur which will have a profound impact on the future of public health as we create it with all of society.” In the 12 years since, new issues have emerged, adding new risks and concerns to Levy’s list and creating a complex combination of challenges and opportunities, both new and old, facing today’s public health students.

Pandemic influenza. Escalating health care costs. Terrorism. Technology. These issues now grace the headlines of major newspapers, providing evidence of their emerging significance in today’s world. From SARS to avian influenza and the H1N1 novel virus, public health departments around the US have faced threats of new infectious diseases, spreading rapidly – consequences of our globalizing world. Current discussions of health care reform highlight the rising cost of health care for patients, providers, insurers, and employers. The economic downturn may lead to growing numbers of under- or uninsured populations as workers lose jobs, coverage, and their ability to pay for care. As safety nets, public health departments face a growing patient population with limited funding.

Yet, despite these difficulties and the uncertainties that lie ahead, opportunities abound in public health today. With the advancement of new technologies, health care is more efficient and safe. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) aid in effective disease surveillance, and new, efficacious medical treatments save countless lives.

Levy’s list, along with today’s new trends, is both intimidating and exhilarating to public health students. In a short time, one year for some, we must gain the skills and knowledge necessary to contribute to the changing face of public health in our country. In the classroom, we develop a tool kit of skills and theories little tested beyond the ivory towers. Once out of the classroom, we enter a dynamic field of growing knowledge and expanding technology with the responsibility of maintaining and improving the health of populations. This process is intimidating because we may not feel fully prepared. Yet these challenges are also exciting and invigorating, as they serve as a call to arms to tangibly help our communities.

The havoc raised by Hurricane Katrina resulted in extreme hardships for vulnerable communities and the public health sector. Subsequent rebuilding efforts generated valuable lessons and improvements that will be applied to future events. Now, public health officials are using these lessons preemptively to develop new programs for hospital management, systems for infectious disease control, and plans to better reach vulnerable communities during an evacuation. While Hurricane Katrina is a single event and not representative of all challenges faced by public health professionals in the US, if we students can function as “problem solvers,” engaged in critical thinking and innovative situational analyses, our future public health career holds great promise.

The field of public health is dynamic and interdisciplinary, which allows us to draw from and apply theories and tools innovatively and collaboratively to solve future problems. It is up to us to approach the field with sound values, a clear vision, and dedicated leadership. We have to face today’s and yesterday’s “dangers” and “opportunities” with confidence and optimism. The future may look intimidating, but it is exhilarating to walk forward armed with the courage to problem-solve and the willingness to gain perspective and insight from the past. ■

Suggested reading: Levy BS. Creating the Future of Public Health: Values, Vision, and Leadership. *Am J Public Health*. 1998; 88(2):188-192.



Janessa Graves visits a local classroom to discuss public health.

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