DIRECTOR’S CORNER
Beyond Social Determinants of Health

The Social Medicine Fellows Program (SMFP) was conceptualized by a group of students from PittMed class of 2017 on the foundation of structural competency which seeks to expand the role of physicians beyond social determinants of health to reducing health disparities and promoting social justice. To garner a broader view of the patient encounter and extending our work beyond the hospital or clinic, we have explored local issues and contexts, implicit and explicit bias as well as structural racism and on policy and institutional strategies that are driving health inequities. Our Fellows examine current publications on social determinants of health (SDH) such as integration of SDH into electronic health records, how poverty affecting health care utilization, and effectiveness of programs that address food insecurity, suboptimal housing, transportation and the built environment. Data sources for our inquiry include the County Health Rankings, Western Pennsylvania Regional Data Center, and Allegheny County Community Needs Assessment. We also see our role as translational scientists bridging the gap between bench, bedside and communities. To this end, we focus on the biology of disadvantage to understand the connection between ill health and chronic stress, poverty and racism. Our Fellows seek to develop research skills and approaches which include qualitative analysis, survey design, participatory action research, upstream quality improvement and racial equity toolkit. Lastly, we started enhancing our advocacy skills through writing op-eds and letters to the editor on critical issues affecting southwestern Pennsylvania.

We would like to thank SMFP’s advisory board members (Ann Thompson, Chenits Pettigrew, Steven Albert, Michael Yonas, Fred Brown and Karen Hacker) and special guest speakers (Alaina Conner, Michael Yonas, Elizabeth Miller, Judy Chang). Drs. Miller and Chang are also the SMFP’s scholarly project advisor. This program could not have come together without these champions of social medicine and their overwhelming support.

GET TO KNOW OUR FELLOWS

Lauren Auster is originally from the Chicagoland area. She received her BA in Biology and minors in Sociology, French, and Chemistry from Case Western Reserve University. During college, she enjoyed classes on social inequality, mass incarceration, and urban sociology which fueled her interest in social medicine. She also served on the executive board of CWRU’s Center for Civic Engagement and Learning and helped pilot the university’s gender inclusive housing initiative. Lauren also has 8 years of experience working with Habitat for...
Humanity and helped found the Greater Cleveland Habitat Young Professionals chapter in Cleveland, OH. Currently she serves as a coordinator for the Women's Clinic and for the Student Alliance for Healthcare Reform/Students for a National Healthcare Plan. Additionally, as a SHARP representative for her class, she provides peers with confidential mental health support and resources. Lauren is especially passionate about community-centered care, women's health, and addiction medicine. She hopes to work in health shortage areas and is considering a dual Family Med/Psychiatry residency.

**Rafa Ifthikhar** is originally from Rochester, NY. She attended Northwestern University where she received a BA in Psychology with a minor in Global Health. After graduating college, she served as a year-long fellow at Project Horseshoe Farm, a community health and education non-profit in rural Alabama. As a fellow, she was involved in managing and executing programs where she worked directly with youth, individuals with severe mental illness, elderly, and other vulnerable members of the community. Currently, Rafa serves as the coordinator for Pitt Med's Geriatric Experiences for Medical Students and the Rural Medicine Interest Group. She enjoys volunteering in Pittsburgh's neighborhoods and at UPSOM's student-run free clinics. She is interested in qualitative and community based participatory research with a focus on social determinants surrounding health issues that affect marginalized individuals. In the future, she hopes to practice primary care in an underserved area and improve population health by leveraging the strengths of communities and grassroots non-profit organizations.

**Arthi Narayanan** is originally from Seattle, WA. She attended the University of Pittsburgh for her undergraduate studies and earned a BA and BS in Sociology and Neuroscience with minors in History and Chemistry. She has been involved in Pittsburgh's healthcare for the past five years. As an intern for the Consumer Health Coalition, she worked on healthcare advocacy for persons with disabilities, by proposing ideas for the state healthcare budget and collecting personal narratives for an anti-stigma campaign surrounding disabilities. She also served on Pitt’s Student Government Board Health and Wellness Committee, to identify and meet the healthcare needs of students, and helped create an on-campus food pantry to address food insecurity among students. Currently, she serves as a co-coordinator for Pitt Med’s Health Policy Advisory Board. She is especially passionate about women’s health and reproductive justice and hopes to incorporate public health into her medical career. She is currently conducting research on behavioral and psychosocial factors affecting postpartum weight management, and cultural barriers surrounding women’s contraceptive choices. She hopes to ultimately pursue a career as a community-based OB/GYN, working closely with underserved populations and advocating for local and national health policy reform.

**Fellows’ Scholarly Projects**

Lauren is pursuing a qualitative, community-based research study on childhood asthma in Pittsburgh. Through interview coding and analysis, she will explore the experiences of parents and guardians of children with asthma. Themes identified from these interviews will inform the creation of a comprehensive asthma care program tailored to community needs (mentor: Dr. Elizabeth Miller).

As part of a larger group of studies in UPMC’s Family Medicine Department, Arthi is exploring the relationship between cultural factors and women’s contraceptive choices, specifically, regrading long-acting, reversible contraceptives (LARCs). Arthi will conduct and help analyze the results from qualitative interviews and focus groups to understand the various ways that culture plays a role in women’s reproductive health decisions (mentors: Dr. Jeanette South-Paul and Dr. John Maier).

Rafa’s scholarly project is still in the works but she hopes to collaborate with ongoing studies conducted by UPMC’s Department of Family Medicine to examine the ways that cultural factors influence women’s health in diverse, urban populations.
Bridging the Gaps (BTG) is a community health internship hosted by the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health and directed by Dr. Thistle Elias, DrPH, MPA. Each year, an interdisciplinary mix of students are selected from Pitt’s Health Science schools and are each matched with a nonprofit in Pittsburgh to address the healthcare needs of an underserved population. During the first few weeks, interns become immersed in their community sites and try to get a sense of what the community’s needs are. Then, interns spend the remainder of the summer putting together a project that specifically meets the need of their organization and benefits the population they are serving. Throughout the summer, interns spend four days a week at their sites working directly with the community. On Wednesdays, the students come together at Pitt to discuss important issues in public health, such as poverty, health inequities, food insecurity, and racial prejudices in healthcare. They also hear from guest speakers from various organizations in Pittsburgh, such as Just Harvest and the Consumer Health Coalition. At the end of the internship, students present their final products at the annual Bridging the Gaps Symposium to an interdisciplinary audience including their peers, site mentors, community members, and Pitt faculty from all the health sciences.

I was matched with the Council of Three Rivers American Indian Center (COTRAIC), an organization based in the South Hills that runs Early Head Start (EHS) Programs throughout Pittsburgh. EHS is a federally funded program that provides childcare services and resources for low-income families. During my internship, my co-intern and I participated in weekly home visits with EHS families to help ensure that their children were meeting important developmental milestones. We also visited childcare centers and conducted assessments and health screenings on EHS children.

For our final project, we conducted a Needs Assessment of the EHS families, to better understand their struggles with their childcare and healthcare and what additional resources they needed in their communities. We surveyed and interviewed 66 families and presented the results to COTRAIC. Ultimately, with our Needs Assessment, COTRAIC can optimize and expand EHS to better meet the needs of the local families here in Pittsburgh.

Working with EHS gave me the incredible opportunity to hear people’s stories firsthand. By listening to families describe their struggles and experiences with childcare and the challenges they face in other aspects of their lives, I witnessed how strong and resilient these families are. By hearing directly from parents, spending time in their homes, and getting to know their entire families, I had the chance to become a part of their communities. I have a better understanding of how a variety of factors, including child care, health services, food services, parks, libraries, family centers, and more, must come together to build strong communities. I am excited to incorporate this learning into my future career as a physician, considering how community resources and strong relationships among community members can help build healthier lifestyles.
**Rafa:** My Bridging the Gaps site was Sojourner House and I volunteered at the organization’s Rehab for Mothers, an in-patient drug and alcohol treatment facility for mothers and their children. In addition to drug and alcohol counseling, the program offers wrap-around services for residents including assistance with housing and finances, parenting coaching, child care, and connections to community resources. As an intern, I sat in on individual and group sessions, attended Narcotics Anonymous meetings with the residents, organized and led clinical group sessions, and spent a lot of time talking with the women, children, and staff at Sojourner House.

For our final project, my co-intern and I created a life skills curriculum on building healthy relationships and resolving interpersonal conflict as many of the women who come to Sojourner House have a history of unhealthy relationships, are trauma survivors, and come from diverse backgrounds. To create the curriculum, we interviewed residents and included their experiences, insights, and quotes in our final product. Some of the topics included in the curriculum are conflict de-escalation, appreciating diversity, venting vs. complaining, and helping others without hurting yourself. The curriculum will be used during the intake process and is a resource for staff to review with new residents.

Through listening to the women, children, and staff at Sojourner House, I now understand addiction as a multifactorial disease that is rooted in a person's circumstances and negative life experiences. Addiction does not discriminate – it can happen to anyone. The women at Sojourner House are some of the strongest and most resilient people I have ever met. They have survived unimaginable situations and continue to fight for themselves and their children. Through interning at Sojourner, I have learned so much about individuals in recovery and their life experiences, which will help me in the future while taking care of patients who have a history of substance abuse and using a strength-based approach to community engagement and development.

**ADVOCACY – INSULIN CAMPAIGN**

This past year the Fellows worked with Right Care Alliance (RCA), a national grassroots organization that mobilizes community leaders, healthcare professionals, and patients to advocate for patients’ rights and improvements in healthcare delivery. In response to the exponential increase in drug prices and the impact that this has on patients, RCA launched their Insulin Campaign. The Insulin Campaign focuses on raising awareness of the high price of insulin and advocating for policies that control the price of drugs and stipulate transparency from pharmaceutical companies.

In the spring, the Fellows and Dr. Bui organized a lunch talk featuring Dr. Mahmud Hussain, an endocrinologist at UPMC, followed by a panel with Dr. Bui and Dr. Sharon Connor from the School of Pharmacy. The lunch talk was attended by medical students, pharmacy students, as well as Internal Medicine residents. Dr. Hussain’s presentation gave students background on how drastically insulin prices have increased within the last decade, the processes and entities responsible for setting drug prices, and the impact that the high price of insulin has on his patients. Many of the students, including us Fellows, were shocked to see Dr. Hussain’s shadow pricing graphic and to hear about the tactics that pharmaceutical companies use to influence the price of insulin. The panelists answered students’ questions and gave more information on how students can get involved in advocacy related to this issue.

The Fellows also attended the Highmark Walk for a Healthy Community and tabled at the walk’s non-profit fair. While tabling, we talked with attendees and community members about the Insulin Campaign and handed out informational flyers. Some of the individuals we talked to have either personally or had a family member who was affected by the high price of prescription drugs. Many of them wrote a message about their experience on a post-it during the event,
which we displayed on a poster for individuals walking by to see. While tabling, we also met other community leaders involved in Pittsburgh’s chapter of RCA, including Sally Jo Snyder of Consumer Health Coalition and Stuart Fisk, the Director of Center for Inclusion Health.

In the future, the Fellows hope to get more involved with RCA’s Insulin Campaign initiatives. Over the summer, we wrote op-eds and hope to publish an article on the Insulin Campaign in Pittsburgh’s newspapers. The leaders of Pittsburgh’s chapter of RCA have also been planning events and rallies for the Insulin Campaign that we hope to participate in. We are very excited to continue to work with RCA throughout our medical school careers and to advocate for this very important cause!

COMMUNITY-BASED ASTHMA STUDY  
by Lauren Auster

In my search for a research mentor, I was very fortunate to meet Dr. Elizabeth Miller, the Director of Adolescent Medicine and the Director of the Community Engagement Core of the Clinical and Translational Science Institute at the University of Pittsburgh. After discussing my interest in qualitative research, we developed a plan for creating a community-based asthma study. Our goal was to understand why children from specific Pittsburgh neighborhoods were increasingly admitted to the emergency room for asthma.

With support from both Dr. Miller and Lisa Ripper, our fabulous Community Health Research Manager, I learned how to write an IRB proposal and developed connections with community partners in both Hazelwood and Homewood, two neighborhoods we would focus on. Once we obtained IRB approval, I contacted parents and guardians of children admitted to the ED for asthma and set up a one-time interview with each family. The interviews were conducted at family support centers to ensure that participants could more easily and comfortably participate in the study. By listening to guardians describe their experiences caring for a child with asthma, I learned about the social etiology of the disease as well as the challenges families faced in mitigating asthma attacks and receiving quality medical care.

With interviews still underway, I am continuing to learn from families and have been able to connect many of them to the family support centers that graciously offered us a space to meet. Once the interviews are transcribed and coded, we hope to identify key themes that will help us create a comprehensive asthma care program for Pittsburgh families. Overall, this project has given me the opportunity to intimately interact with community members and listen to stories of health and disease that have expanded my worldview. I am excited to see how the results of the study will inform both health providers and community members on how to best support families with asthma.

SERVICE IS THE HEART OF OUR WORK!

CATCH Home Visit Project

In collaboration with Dr. Elizabeth Miller, Dr. Braven Ragunathan, and 3rd year medical student Jane Kwon, the Fellows have helped implement the CATCH Project, a home visitation service. The goal of this service is to maximize medical and social support systems and provide comprehensive resources for families in need in the greater Pittsburgh area. Through our partnership with Jeremiah’s Place, Pittsburgh’s crisis nursery, and the Women’s Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh, we can connect with families who could benefit from additional support through a home visit. For each visit, a pediatric resident from the UPMC Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh and a medical student meet with a family at their current residence. The team goes through a checklist with the families to assess their needs and provide an outlet for them to share any concerns. The checklist includes a comprehensive resource guide for issues such as health insurance, food security, education, housing, legal needs, childcare, and violence education. The team also helps families connect with or call these resources during the visit. The goal is to leave each home visit having helped a family connect to existing support systems. This coming year, the Fellows will be recruiting additional medical student volunteers to help conduct home visits. We are very excited to expand this program and continue working with families in the Pittsburgh community!

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