

systems' new programs to democratize health data are helping to fill this gap by providing local health data that can be linked to local social and environmental contexts, thereby offering greater insight into interventions that are locally relevant and could have the greatest impact on our community's health. The Durham Neighborhood Compass is currently being used as a tool to help galvanize, prioritize, and track the effectiveness of

local community and population health improvement interventions.

As communities continue work to address social and environmental determinants of health, the Durham Neighborhood Compass provides a useful model. If adopted widely, similar approaches could help meaningfully engage stakeholders in efforts to improve health and health equity locally, regionally, and nationally. *AJPH*

L. Ebony Boulware, MD, MPH  
Michelle Lyn, MBA, MHA

#### CONTRIBUTORS

L. E. Boulware and M. Lyn contributed equally to this editorial.

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#### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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## Communicating With the Public Is Key to Public Health

 See also Morabia and Benjamin, p. 530.

It is widely understood that the aim of public health is to promote and protect the health of populations where they live, learn, work, and play. Yet it is less commonly understood that the cornerstone science of public health, epidemiology, is needed to accomplish this goal. A key feature of our field is to accurately measure and understand exposures and outcomes within populations of people, also known as the public; therefore, it should be part of our training and goals as epidemiologists to inform the public on how they can help themselves stay healthy.

Although this call to action seems straightforward, a disconnect remains between those who conduct research and public opinion about evidence-based public health programs in the United States. For example, the most effective evidence-based solutions to our nation's largest public health crisis, the opioid epidemic, are banned from receiving federal funding (e.g., needle exchanges can only receive federal monies to pay for staff and

programs, but not for syringes) or are yet to be used at scale (e.g., safe injection sites). How do we, as scientists and public health advocates, translate our science into action and even policy?

#### BRIDGING THE GAP

Science communication, or #scicomm on social media, is one small but important step I have employed to start bridging this gap. I am an epidemiologist specializing in infectious diseases and digital health who has worked in both the nonprofit and private sectors using data-driven and evidence-based technology solutions for preventing, monitoring, and improving public health. Late last year, I shared my call to action for scientists to engage more on social media in a piece for *Scientific American* (“Science Needs More Public Faces”). It has become a passion of mine to help scientists communicate their science. Social media has allowed me to share my passion for digital health and

infectious disease research and connect with other scientists and those interested in science. Our engagement with the public is necessary for our country, as misinformation springs up daily. And it is important for scientists to be able to share their findings and expertise with those who would benefit from it the most, the public. Further, if our science is not communicated to the public, it will get lost or misconstrued. This will inevitably cause greater harm to public health (as in the case of the vaccine debate). Communication methods should be taught in graduate school, along with statistics, survey design, and basic science.

In preparing to write this editorial, I took to Twitter to ask scientists, “How do you translate the science you produce into

action or policy? Or in what ways do you try?!” A summary of their recommendations follows:

1. When using social media, use hashtags. These are short phrases preceded by the pound (or hash) symbol that tag your thoughts. There are several widely used hashtags for public health, including #publichealth, #EpiTwitter, #sciencetwitter, and #Sci-comm. Most conferences have hashtags you can use while attending meetings. These tags help others find out about what is important in the field and help you gain visibility as a science communicator.
2. Join policy or advocacy groups. These organizations employ trained individuals who know how to frame your research for public policy and affairs audiences (e.g., elected officials or regulators).
3. When ready to move beyond social media, writing editorials

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Beth S. Linas is with the Department of Clinical Quality & Informatics, Health Technical Center, The MITRE Corporation, McLean, VA.

Correspondence should be sent to Beth S. Linas, Epidemiologist, Lead Public Health Specialist, 7515 Colshire Drive, M/SH630, McLean, VA 22102 (e-mail: blinas@mitre.org). Reprints can be ordered at <http://www.ajph.org> by clicking the “Reprints” link.

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is a good way to engage and reach audiences beyond your field of study. It has been my experience that news outlets appreciate when experts want to engage their readers, and are very helpful in editing your work to fit their audience's needs.

Although academic culture thrives on a “publish or perish” cycle, leaving little to no time to engage with wider audiences, small efforts can go a long way. Social media is a free and quick method for reaching new audiences where they already are, and science communication must become part of our public health toolbox. *AJPH*

*Beth S. Linas, PhD, MHS*

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