Welcome
to Columbia Public Health magazine, the new annual publication of the Joseph L. Mailman School. I am delighted you are here.

In these pages you will glimpse some of the exciting and consequential work our school is doing to create a future of good health for all. Our impact is broad and deep, global and local. It ranges from making dramatic progress in battling the HIV/AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa to confronting dangers in the air people breathe right here in our own upper Manhattan neighborhood. It includes transforming how public health is taught in order to better prepare tomorrow’s leaders.

Never before has there been such an exciting or important time for public health leadership. We live in an increasingly interconnected world, facing common concerns that include climate change, modern epidemics of both infectious and chronic diseases, and the challenge of preserving good health throughout lives that have grown dramatically longer.

All of this demands a transformation in how we work together—south and north, urban and rural, rich and poor.

For those of you who are not public health insiders, let me explain just a little about what we do. Our mission is lofty but simple: to improve the well-being of people everywhere by understanding health challenges, discovering solutions to prevent or resolve them, and devising changes in policy and practices at a population level, whether local, national, or global.

How do we do this at Columbia? By taking a “life-course approach” to health. This means

that—together with experts in medicine, public policy, business, philanthropy, and other sectors—we must work to prevent disease and disability and promote good health at every age and stage of life, understanding that what happens at one juncture influences health later on. In this issue you will read, for example, about how exposure to air pollution during the prenatal period sets the stage for asthma, cognitive problems, and even obesity later in childhood and for cancer further down the line. You will learn how cigarette smoking primes the brain, on a molecular level, for other addictions, particularly to cocaine. Insights like these make it clear that our policies, practices, and investments in the realm of health must consider and address each issue at its roots and causes throughout life.

Research by our faculty addresses an extraordinary number of public health concerns, from how lead exposure damages brain cells to how a tax on soda pop would impact the prevalence and healthcare costs of obesity. I’m proud to lead a school that is just bursting with extraordinary scientists conducting research on every level from cells to society, and creating on-the-ground programs that save lives all around the globe.

As a school, nothing we do is more important than educating the next generation of public health leaders. This fall we proudly debuted a groundbreaking approach to public health education. Nearly three years in the making—and a top priority for me from the moment I arrived as Dean in May 2008—our Columbia MPH curriculum offers a new vision for how we train public health scientists, practitioners, and thought leaders. Nearly 200 members of the faculty worked to make it a reality. At the heart of the redesigned curriculum is the life-course approach, along with many other innovative features. I hope you’ll enjoy reading about it and other aspects of the vital work we do.

Yours in health,

Dean Linda P. Fried