A Pep Rally for Team Science

A litany of marquee names spans 20th-century public health: pioneers like scientist Jonas Salk, MD, developer of the polio vaccine; crusaders like Lillian Wald, founder of community nursing; and innovators like Charles Drew, MD, whose techniques for storing blood saved thousands of lives during World War II. As remarkable as their accomplishments were, generating knowledge for the 21st century demands the synergy of collective action. Whether for great science, great solutions, or great impact, public health is a team sport.

The evidence has never been clearer: As we tackle interconnected population health challenges like climate change, obesity, and emerging infectious diseases, the barriers between disciplinary silos are crumbling. Complex problems require complex solutions, conceived and realized by scholarly teams with the ability to view an issue from many angles.

Take Zika. As I write, the mosquito-borne virus is emerging in the Southern United States, putting countless newborns at risk of serious birth defects. Even before the virus arrived here, epidemiologists generated models anticipating transmission of the virus among vulnerable populations; now biostatisticians are integrating live data into those models. Infectious-disease and basic-laboratory experts are devising screening tests to detect infection and laying the groundwork for a vaccine. Experts in maternal health and health promotion are communicating prevention strategies to an anxious public. And policy analysts are advising legislators on strategies to combat Zika’s spread, while ethicists are championing the rights of affected populations in any coordinated response.

At the Mailman School, we’re cheering for Team Science. Transdisciplinary teams from all of our departments and centers are improving population health by addressing chronic disease, health disparities, and healthy aging. Team Science guides our educational philosophy, too. We’ve made an interdisciplinary core—animated by intellectual versatility—the foundation of our MPH program.

In this edition of Columbia Public Health, we report on cross-disciplinary partnerships underway from Jordan to Zimbabwe to New York City. Throughout the 2016–17 academic year, our signature lecture series—“Grand Rounds on the Future of Public Health”—will give Team Science a megaphone, bringing together researchers from across the School for lively discussions about partnerships with shared objectives that engage all of our faculty.

As citizens, we see what collective action and dedication can achieve within our communities. As scientists and scholars, we must approach our work in a similar manner—not as individuals, but as a team. Together, we can pool the vast knowledge and skills from every corner of the public health field to build a healthier, more equitable world.