Price Point

Author Miriam Laugesen Follows the Money

In November, Harvard University Press will publish *Fixing Medical Prices: How Physicians are Paid*. The 300-page tome is the result of a decade-long inquiry by Miriam Laugesen, PhD, associate professor of Health Policy and Management, into the subtle influence of physician organizations on federal reimbursement schedules for medical services.

In prose lively enough to keep a lay audience turning the pages, Laugesen digs into why medical care in the United States costs more than anywhere else in the world and how 1989 legislation meant by Congress to promote primary care and improve population health nationwide has been subverted.

The book takes as a starting point a 2007 encounter between the author and her internist neighbor, who bemoaned low reimbursement rates for primary care. The physician’s comments sparked Laugesen’s investigative passion and in 2011 she published her first paper on the subject in the journal *Health Affairs* with Sherry Glied, PhD, a longtime professor of Health and Policy Management who is now dean of New York University’s Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service.

In that preliminary paper, Laugesen and Glied compared fees paid by public and private insurers for primary care office visits and hip replacements in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Their analysis revealed that disparities in fees—not practice costs, volume of services, or tuition expenses—were responsible for radically higher prices here in the U.S.

In *Fixing Medical Prices*, Laugesen picks up where earlier works left off, with a deep dive to the heart of the U.S. medical pricing process. She zeroes in on the role of a largely unknown yet influential committee of the American Medical Association, comprised of specialists who so effectively dominate the system that Medicare adopts the vast majority of their recommendations as policy. In this work, the scholar explores how and why the AMA makes its recommendations and the secrets of its influence. Writes Laugesen: “Understanding how and why we value different medical services is a necessary step toward fixing our health care system.”

Cities for Tomorrow: Hosted by the New York Times at its Times Square Center, the daylong event brought together urban planners, architects, policymakers, and researchers, including Ruth Finkelstein, ScD, assistant professor of Health Policy and Management and associate director of Columbia’s Butler Aging Center, who appeared on the “Boomer Cities” panel alongside Richard Rosen, principal at Perkins Eastman, and Times moderator Ginia Bellafonte. “We need a world that works for all of us—not a parallel world for old people,” said Finkelstein, who called for fresh attitudes toward aging. “We need to reclaim oldness as experience, wisdom, as being workers, as being teachers, as being activists.”
The Heat is On

A three-day Health and Climate Colloquium, organized by the Mailman School and the International Research Institute for Climate and Society, took place at Columbia’s Lamont-Doherty Earth observatory campus in June.

Acknowledging the achievements of COP 21 and the UN Sustainable Development goals, Keith Hansen from the World Bank affirmed in his keynote speech that climate change threatens to undo the health and development gains of recent years, potentially increasing the number of poor people by 100 million in the next 15 years. To stave off this outcome, he said climate science is urgently needed. “The work you do may be technical,” he said, “but it can be transformational.”

To spur such transformation, the Mailman School is leading the Global Consortium on Climate and Health Education. The first training is in October at the American Public Health Association Conference in Denver. Plans to offer online courses to train working professionals and other new audiences are also in the works.

Beyond Buzz

Big Data Hits the Books

For public health scholars without training in computer science, it’s no mean feat to leverage the power of big data. To help graduate students make the most of the data they collect, the Mailman School now offers Fundamentals in High-Performance Computing, a seven-week class offered for the first time in January 2016. “We’re in a Big Data era,” says Rebecca Yohannes, director of High Performance Computing and developer of the training program. “There is a lot of information out there, and to make sense of it, you can’t do that on a personal computer.”

To promote the best use of datasets, large and small, the Department of Biostatistics offers a consulting service, co-directed by Shing Lee, PhD, and Codruta Chiuzan, PhD, both assistant professors of Biostatistics. “If there is one piece of advice I can give people, it’s to include a statistician early,” says Lee. “If it is a badly designed study, there might be a bias we can’t undo at the end.”

Together with staff biostatisticians Jimmy Duong and Vivian Zhang, Lee and Chiuzan meet with health sciences investigators from across Columbia’s campus to formulate abstracts, rework rejected articles, or develop grant proposals. This past year, the group assisted researchers in Radiation Oncology to assess the accuracy of preoperative imaging for breast cancer patients as a tool for radiation therapy and with the Division of Pediatric Cardiology to select the right variables and methodology to evaluate a computer algorithm that uses MRIs to measure blood flow through a patient’s heart. “The motivation is simple,” says Lee. “We want to contribute to improving the science on campus.”

The “Care Tank”

Center for Healthcare Management

In June, the Mailman School’s Center for Healthcare Management hosted its fifth international forum to promote a new vision for the organization, financing, and delivery of healthcare. The two-day event in Berlin took a personal approach, barring Power Point slides and privileging face-to-face conversations. “We created a new, very interactive format,” says Katharina Janus, PhD, founder and director of the Center. “We call it a Knowledge Party, a dinner party with content.”

An adjunct associate professor of Health Policy and Management who also has a professorial post in Germany, Janus balances the needs of patients, providers, and payers in the work of what she’s dubbed the “Care Tank.” “My goal has always been to bring the best minds together, no matter where they come from,” says Janus, who has recruited members with professional backgrounds in healthcare delivery, academia, and industry. “The Care-Tank is a cross between a think-tank and a do-tank. It grew out of my past collaborations with people from very different organizations, from all over the world.”

photo (left) by Mike Cohen Photography for The New York Times
‘Troublemakers Who Change Lives’
Cecile Richards Calls Graduates to Action

In May, the Mailman School conferred more than 600 degrees earned by 21 doctoral students and the largest class of master’s students in the School’s history, including the first cohort to earn a Master of Health Administration, the School’s “healthcare MBA.”

In her address to the Class of 2016, Cecile Richards, president of Planned Parenthood Federation of America (pictured above, center), urged the graduates to be “the kind of troublemakers who change lives.” In a speech citing U.S. Rep John Lewis, birth control pioneer Estelle Griswold, Black Lives Matter, and the speaker’s mother, the late Ann Richards, governor of Texas, Richards saluted the graduates for their commitment to change. “You could’ve let public health issues in Flint, Michigan, or West Texas or sub-Saharan Africa be someone else’s problem,” she said. “But when you dedicated your life to public health, that’s not what you signed up for.”

In her remarks, Dean Linda P. Fried, MD, MPH, discussed the creativity required of public health advocates. “We are only successful,” she said, “when we allow our thinking to evolve, fearlessly exploring new avenues that others haven’t tried or didn’t even know were on the map.”

Echoing Richards’ speech, student speaker Arielle Juberg, MPH in population and family health, reflected on the power of collaboration to affect positive change. “Our class has had the privilege of learning from professors and mentors who joined with others to confront injustices and disparities,” she said. “Their examples—working in the Civil Rights Movement, fighting for the rights of HIV-positive women, and advocating for environments free of lead and other toxins—inspire us.”

Fried presented Richards with the Mailman School of Public Health Visionary Leadership Award. Austin Montgomery Coe, of the Graduate Student Association, presented Martina Pavlicova, PhD, associate professor of Biostatistics, with the Teaching Excellence Award, and Joseph Graziano, PhD, interim chair of Environmental Health Sciences, with the Core Teaching Award. (Pavlicova was also the recipient of a University-wide Presidential Teaching Award.)

At an earlier event, Fried recognized Outstanding Teaching Award recipients Katrina Kezios, a doctoral candidate in Epidemiology, and Ramael Osasogie Ohiomoba. Coe received the Campbell Award for “exceptional leadership and Columbia Spirit,” and Juan Manuel Flores received the John and Kathleen Gorman Public Health Humanitarian Award. An additional 36 students received awards in 24 categories for departmental distinctions.

The ceremony concluded as Fried led graduates in the Oath for Public Health Professionals, starting with the declaration, “Health is a human right.”
In *Prison Dogs*, documentarian Perri Peltz, MPH ’84, follows a cohort in the non-profit Puppies Behind Bars, which houses Labrador retrievers with inmates who train the dogs to work as service animals for disabled veterans. “The process is transformative,” says Peltz, who calls the 72-minute film a story of redemption, love, and hope. “It’s about the relationships that form among the men, the puppies, and the veterans who ultimately benefit.”

While only half of the pups in the film graduate to careers as service animals, most of their trainers—like most people in prison—return to society. For former inmate Jon Rivera, Puppies Behind Bars was a chance to acquire new credentials, including certifications as a dog groomer and a dog trainer. “He’s working doing both of those things,” says Peltz. “He’s got housing and family, a way to sustain himself, and he’s happy.”

For Peltz, who is also pursuing a DrPH in Sociomedical Sciences at the Mailman School and serves on its Board of Overseers, *Prison Dogs* is the latest production in a 25-year career dedicated to telling the stories behind public health statistics. An alumna of *Dateline NBC*, ABC’s 20/20, and CNN, Peltz has worked as an anchor, a director, and a producer, covering topics from alcohol abuse to the war on poverty.

In *A Journey of a Thousand Miles: Peacekeepers*, she follows Bangladeshi women on assignment in Haiti for the United Nations; her short films for *The New York Times* Op-Docs series “Conversations on Race” explore identity in America. *Prison Dogs*, which made its premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival in April, was filmed at the Fishkill Correctional Facility in upstate New York. “So many of these issues are pressing, and they don’t get the time and attention I feel they deserve,” says Peltz, who currently hosts two radio programs—on women’s health and on medicine in the media—for SiriusXM.

“All of us in public health need to do a better job of communicating to the public.”

To command attention, especially when the material is complicated or painful, Peltz seeks out compelling characters grappling with issues she hopes her audience will explore. In her 2011 HBO documentary *The Education of Dee Dee Ricks*, Peltz chronicles a woman’s journey from breast cancer diagnosis to survivorship. Along the way, the film’s eponym—a Manhattan financial consultant and philanthropist—contends with the disparities in care encountered by women who share her diagnosis but not her socio-economic status, and ultimately embraces a new career as an advocate for access to affordable, high-quality healthcare.

Committed to making such stories widely available, Peltz and editor Geeta Gandbhir formed the joint production company G2P2 Films to pursue their shared passion for social justice. “Perri’s deeper understanding of public health helps us to find angles,” says Gandbhir. “She knows what to ask and what to focus on so that a larger audience can understand the complexities of the issues.”

Peltz’s knack for finding a compelling angle came in especially handy when the pair turned their gaze to the American prison system. “The United States incarcerates more individuals than any other country, and our prison recidivism rates are sky high,” says Peltz. “We wanted to showcase prison reform in a very specific program so people can focus on the problem.”
Leaders

Fan Fiction

When Tribeca Film Festival co-founder Robert DeNiro announced that festival organizers had determined to drop the movie *Vaxxed: From Cover-up to Catastrophe* from their 2016 lineup, he had a champion in W. Ian Lipkin, MD, the John Snow Professor of Epidemiology and director of the Columbia Center for Immunity and Infection, whose own investigations have repeatedly shown no causal link between childhood vaccines and the risk of autism. “If *Vaxxed* had been submitted as science fiction, it would merit attention for its story line, character development, and dialogue,” wrote Lipkin in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed. “But as a documentary, it misrepresents what science knows about autism, undermines public confidence in the safety and efficacy of vaccines, and attacks the integrity of legitimate scientists and public health officials.”

Museum Quality

This summer, Jeffrey Shaman, PhD associate professor of Environmental Health Sciences, partnered with the American Museum of Natural History to swab the tongues, noses, and hands of visitors to the exhibit “The Secret World Inside You,” all about the human microbiome. The experiment is part of a larger study meant to shed light on respiratory viruses and how our immune system responds to them. “While we all suffer from colds and flu, we still know very little about their transmission dynamics,” says Shaman, who develops computer models to forecast outbreaks of influenza and Ebola and will use the data collected at the museum to enhance their predictive value. The work is of great interest to the Department of Defense, which funded the study. “The military has always been interested in infectious disease, and for good reason,” says Shaman. “In the history of the U.S. military, more people have died from infectious disease than from combat.”

Law & Order

Students and faculty rallied on March 2 as the Supreme Court heard *Whole Woman’s Health v. Hellerstedt* and considered whether restrictions imposed on Texas abortion clinics constituted the kind of “undue burden” prohibited by the 1992 case *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. Rally organizers included the Queer Health Task Force; SHAG, the Sexual and Reproductive Health Action Group; and students and faculty in the Sexuality, Sexual, and Reproductive Health Certificate program. Catherine Sokoloff, MPH ’16, was in the gallery as the Court heard arguments. “I was struck by the knowledge that, outside these walls, thousands gathered and exercised their constitutional right to demonstrate, while still more rallied in their cities and states around the country,” she wrote in an essay for the Mailman School website. “That day, the fight was over access and, ultimately, over choice.”
The Google Method

Mailman School epidemiologists have developed a novel method to assess how the streetscape affects a pedestrian's risk of injury. Using Google Street View, the investigators assessed the pedestrian environment at more than 500 New York City intersections. In the resulting American Journal of Public Health report, the authors reveal that intersections with more pedestrians had a lower risk of injury per pedestrian and that more injuries occurred in contexts with visual distractions, such as billboards and bus stops. “The Google Street View approach to conducting ‘virtual’ neighborhood inspections does away with the need for field teams to conduct in-person audits,” says Andrew Rundle, DrPH, associate professor of Epidemiology, who led the project. “To our knowledge, virtual audits have not previously been used to assess risk factors for pedestrian injury.”

Moving to the Music

A pop song with sunny Afro-jazz beats and a catchy jingle is making the case across Zimbabwe for ICAP’s Population-based Impact Assessment (PHIA) Project, a survey to measure the effect and reach of HIV programs. To lead musical production, ICAP approached Albert Nyathi, a Zimbabwean poet, musician, and activist, who recruited fellow artists. Together, they are the voices and faces of “Knock Knock Knock,” produced in English and eight languages native to Zimbabwe. “Many people are understandably reluctant to allow someone to come into their home and draw their blood,” says Jessica Justman, principal investigator for the PHIA Project and ICAP’s senior technical director. “The song makes it easier for people to understand why it’s important for them to participate.”

Book Smarts & Beyond

Since 2013, the free, after-school program BridgeUp—funded by the Helen Gurley Brown Trust and hosted by the New York Public Library, has offered kids in grades 8 to 10 from low-income families mentorship and enrichment activities meant to boost their academic prospects. This year, BridgeUp added Be Well, a health and wellness component created by Alwyn Cohall, MD, professor of Sociomedical Sciences, and his co-director at the Harlem Health Promotion Center, Renee Cohall, LCSW-R. “We want to get rid of the barriers between academics, youth development, and health,” says Alwyn Cohall. “If a young person gets pregnant or is so depressed that they don’t want to get out of bed, they’re not going to take advantage of all that BridgeUp has to offer.”
In May, the FDA issued its final rules on menu labeling and started the one-year countdown until grocery stores, convenience stores, and restaurants with more than 20 locations will be required to provide nutritional information for all prepared foods. Industry groups have been fierce critics of the guidelines—and they’ve done a much better job of making their case than did public health proponents, say James Colgrove and Rachel Shelton.

For evidence, they point to the campaigns waged by industry to humanize their concerns in the seven years since the rules were introduced in 2010 as part of the Affordable Care Act. This spring, with support from the Lerner Center for Health Promotion, the Sociomedical Sciences professors made a rhetorical analysis of public comments submitted to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in response to the proposed regulation. In the process, they identified two divergent approaches to the debate. Public health used the language of social justice, prioritizing collective responsibility and cooperation, while industry emphasized the values of market justice, placing a premium on individual liberty and economic opportunity.

Key shortcomings that emerged in their analysis were public health’s seeming unwillingness to respond to industry, emphasis on academic data, and failure to humanize their case. While industry comments acknowledged the importance of health in the debate over menu labeling, public health failed to address industry arguments over financial and logistical burdens.

Public health pros favor scientific rhetoric, says Shelton, while industry wrote the book on lobbying lawmakers. In the meantime, how scholars should modulate their public messaging is becoming its own debate, one the Lerner Center for Health Promotion intends to win by coaching faculty in the art of public persuasion.