



Think Globally, Act Locally

A growing interest in global health issues among medical students spurs interest in public health electives, both at home and abroad.



Adrienne Socci '08 with a Rwandan clinic nurse.

Before she enrolled at Upstate Medical University, Adrienne Socci '08 spent two years volunteering with the global public health agency, Partners in Health, working on tuberculosis programs in Peru and Russia.

That global health experience solidified her desire to become a physician and became a driving force in her medical study. Not content to wait until she completed her training to go back, Socci took a leave of absence from Upstate and spent seven months last year in Rwanda with Partners in Health.

"A lot of people were surprised that you could take a leave of absence like that during medical school, but the administration didn't just allow me to do it, they helped me do it," she says.

In addition to taking a leave, Socci was able to earn credit for her experience as a public health elective.

The Public Health elective is available to Upstate Medical students during all four years (although if taken in the fourth year, it's referred to as a selective and meets the fourth-year basic science requirement). Students can choose to work at the county health department, under the supervision of County Health Commissioner Cynthia Morrow, MD, or they can do an independent public health project, typically under the supervision of Sally Sutphen, MSc, MPH, assistant director of the preventive medicine program. Socci chose the latter route.

In Rwanda, she worked in Ministry of Health hospitals and health centers on a comprehensive health care delivery program, including HIV and tuberculosis care as well as all primary care services. At each facility, she worked with the Rwandan staff on developing and improving the health center

programs, infrastructure, and patient care. "The health centers were staffed entirely by nurses so I would see patients with them while also working with the head of the health center on staffing, equipment, drug supply, and other logistical issues," Socci says.

To earn her elective, she wrote a paper on her experience and made a presentation to fellow medical students upon her return.

After finishing her last semester of coursework at Upstate and interviewing for residency programs in orthopedic surgery, Socci went back to Rwanda in February and will work there through mid April. She is one of an increasing number of medical students who seek to augment their medical study with international experiences.

"There is a tremendous burst of interest among students about global health issues," says Sutphen. "More and more students are interested and willing and able to go abroad to gain international experience in public health."

Even those who don't physically go abroad are hungry for information, she says, clearly evidenced by attendance at the E. Gregory Keating Global Health Lecture Series events. "These lectures are filled with medical students," she adds. "They show up and ask intelligent, probing questions. They want to get involved and advocate. I always walk away impressed."



The staff of the Rusamo Health center in Rusamo, Rwanda. Adrienne Socci '08 is in the front row, far right.

Josephine Dunn Junius '10, another medical student with a primary interest in global public health, was able to satisfy her interests through a local public health elective.

A native of Liberia, Junius is concurrently earning a master's in public health from George Washington University while she attends Upstate. Interested in global health but unable to go abroad, Junius spent four months during the summer and early fall doing a health needs assessment of migrant dairy farm workers in Onondaga County.

As a research intern at the Onondaga County Health Department, Junius traveled to dairy farms throughout the county interviewing seasonal workers at these farms.

"They are mostly young men from Guatemala and Mexico who come here and work for a year or two on the dairy farms," she says. "So, although I was right here in Onondaga County, I got to work with an 'international population' outside my medical school experience."

These workers typically live on the farms and work in excess of 65 hours a week. They receive no health insurance and often speak limited English.

"They receive some health services through Finger Lakes Migrant Health and the Cornell Farm Worker Program, but it's not regular or adequate to address their health care needs," Junius says.

In addition to her interviews, she analyzed three years of data from the Migrant Health Program and produced graphs, charts and tables that were included in a recently submitted

five-year renewal state grant for the program.

The project was one of many conducted by Upstate medical students that augment the day-to-day work of the County Health Department.

"All senior staff at the health department keep a running wish list of non-critical projects that they would like to see done and medical students are often able to provide the needed capacity to see that these projects are completed," says Dr. Morrow. "While these projects are not critical to the functioning of the health department, they frequently provide a better understanding of the involved issues and can ultimately lead to programmatic changes."

Whether their electives take place at home or abroad, these medical students gain an important exposure to population-based aspects of medicine.

"Most of medical school focuses on the doctor-patient relationship," says Sutphen. "When you work in public health, you don't just treat the individuals, you treat the community. You treat the factors in the community so that all the individuals in that community are affected."

Junius' public health elective cemented her interest in a medical career working with underserved populations. Socci has similar interests and plans to work internationally for a significant portion of her career.

"There are a lot of aspects of this kind of work that are appealing to me," she says. "The health disparities are huge. The work is rewarding. The travel is an adventure." ■