

Foreword

Marjorie Bowman and Wendy Voet 18 May 2012

The field of public health is far-reaching, embracing the concept that, as per the World Health Organization's definition, "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (1946). Public health touches on aspects of the human condition that range from the most fundamental (e.g., needs for adequate food, water and shelter), to higher order concerns (e.g., the nature and quality of social relationships). Yet the tools of public health have historically been blunt instruments, failing to capture the sweep and complexity of social forces that shape the human condition. However, in recent years, the field has become more and more interdisciplinary and has supported methods that integrate the fields of medicine, humanities and arts.

By showcasing art as a tool for research and action, this special section expands the framework for examining (and, ultimately, aiming to improve) human health. Complexity, nuance, and an acute awareness of audience are strong artistic motivators, and these qualities are reflected in the powerful series of articles in this issue, which represent both an array of creative media and a broad range of public health-relevant issues. These articles illustrate how the methods of art (visual,

performance and narrative) can advance scholarship and action to improve population health. As a tool for health advancement, art:

- Engages audiences intellectually and emotionally so that key health issues being discussed are provocative, memorable and move people to make change;
- Provides essential qualitative data (through photography and narrative) or acts to elicit additional qualitative data from community members about health issues;
- Changes public health status through engaging community members in an empowering process and/or changing environments that impact on health; and
- Fosters interdisciplinary collaboration, which is central to the field of public health.

The articles included in this special edition are drawn from researchers and artists who presented their work during a year-long seminar series hosted by the University of Pennsylvania Center for Public Health Initiatives. This 2009-2010 series showcased creative, interdisciplinary projects that used arts and media to address public health challenges, and inspired the diverse Philadelphia public health community.

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References

Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, 19-22 June, 1946; signed on 22 July 1946 by the representatives of 61 States (Official Records of the World Health Organization, no. 2, p. 100) and entered into force on 7 April 1948.