



Lisa V. Smith:

Bringing New Recruits to Her Epidemiological Cause

SHE DOES IMPORTANT WORK AT THE L.A. COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH, BUT IS EQUALLY PASSIONATE ABOUT TEACHING AND PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR SPH STUDENTS TO BECOME FUTURE COLLEAGUES.

Lisa V. Smith loves to share her passion for public health in general and epidemiology in particular with anyone who wants to hear about it – whether it’s the UCLA School of Public Health students she teaches in the classroom and mentors in her position at the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, or her neighbors in the South Los Angeles community in which she grew up and continues to reside.

Smith, an adjunct assistant professor of epidemiology at the school as well as an alumna (M.P.H. '94, Dr.P.H. '00), served as director of the Epidemiology Unit in the county’s Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD) Program from 2002 to 2006 before being appointed to her current position as chief of the Surveillance, Epidemiology and Evaluation unit of the county’s Division of Chronic Disease and Injury Prevention.

She speaks enthusiastically about what she and her colleagues have been able to achieve at both units. As a part of the nation’s second-largest health department, L.A. County’s STD program oversees one of every 25 STD cases in the nation. Smith’s unit ran more than a dozen surveillance databases and projects, including the initiation of a rapid HIV testing program. At the newly created Surveillance Epidemiology and Evaluation Unit, Smith’s “small but mighty” staff of three serves as what she calls “accountants of health,” providing important data that inform others at the county in developing policy, particularly in the area of chronic disease. “The problem with chronic disease, as opposed to STDs, is that there are very few surveillance systems,” Smith explains. “With STDs, you have reports of gonorrhea, chlamydia, syphilis and others coming through, to give you a sense of what’s out there. You don’t have reports coming in that someone is obese, or that someone has hypertension, or has started smoking. But we need that to target individuals.”

To get information that's not formally collected, Smith's unit has begun to conduct rapid surveys and assessments on a variety of health-related matters, getting an immediate reading on such topics as the California Smokers' Helpline telephone program, menu labeling in fast-food restaurants, and potential barriers to a county-wide trans-fat reduction campaign. Smith also provides important information in support of the county's PLACE (Policies for Livable Active Communities & Environments) program, which promotes the development of healthier communities through policy changes.

But for all of her professional accomplishments, nothing makes Smith happier than successfully recruiting students to careers at the county. In both of her units, she has provided structured internships and has encouraged her students to apply; dozens have taken her up on it, and many were subsequently hired by Smith or her colleagues. "I have students I've recruited who have passed me up at the county, who are now ranked higher than I am," she says, laughing. "I'm proud that our students are doing so well!" Smith, who rarely turns down invitations to discuss opportunities with students at career fairs or in classroom presentations, concedes that any estimate as to the number of UCLA School of Public Health students now working at the county whom she at one time assisted is probably low. "We have more than 40 departments," she says. "Students can end up going anywhere and I don't always know about it."

She is a believer in the value of exposing the school's epidemiology students to the "real world" experience of a local health department as a complement to the theory they're learning at the school. "I make sure they realize that what they learn in the classroom is the science, and when they get into the Department of Public Health, it's a lot more art," she says. "You have to know the foundation of epidemiology, and our school provides some of the best foundation theory in the country. But in the real world it can be messy – particularly when you're dealing with stigmatized populations like people who have STDs. There is going to be missing data and there's going to be some lying. You have to make the best of it, and at the county we are still able to do great work with not a lot of money."

Learning to crunch numbers while dealing with difficult, "messy" data is one of the main lessons students take away from a course Smith has taught for the last three years, Computer Management of Health Data Using SAS Software. The course teaches students how to use the data processing system that is now widely employed in the business world and in many health departments, including

L.A. County's. The practical, hands-on nature of the course has made it extremely popular, and Smith's teaching excellence was recognized when she was named "Faculty of the Year" by the Public Health Student Association in 2006, the first year she taught SAS.

Smith is equally committed in her efforts to interest young people from disadvantaged communities in pursuing public health education. In 1998 she received the UCLA Fair and Open Academic Environment award in recognition of her efforts to increase the diversity of the School of Public Health. She has logged countless hours conducting outreach with first-generation college students. Many of these students share disadvantages that Smith herself felt as an undergraduate.

"When I was younger, I didn't have any vision for what I wanted, so I didn't maximize my opportunities," she says. Although Smith later learned that others in her extended family had gone to college, she didn't know it at the time. She graduated from Loyola Marymount University in 1979 with a degree in biology, knowing nothing about public health; it wasn't until more than a decade later that she applied to the school's M.P.H. program in the Department of Epidemiology, going on to receive her doctorate in 2000 and then a UC President's Postdoctoral Fellowship.

Although she notes that more than one insurance agent has asked why she doesn't consider moving to a more affluent community, Smith has no desire to leave South Los Angeles. "It's important to me to be here because I am grounded, and this keeps me humble," she says. "As a community-based epidemiologist, I spend time listening to the community before I develop surveys. You live here and you see why you can't just preach to people to get fit – they aren't spending a lot of time outside because there's violence and safety comes first. There's obesity because you have ice cream trucks and street vendors coming around selling junk food. Many residents don't know that they should expect more and make better food choices.

"What I bring to public health is the ability to tell my colleagues what it's really like here. And it's not all negative like what's shown on television. I start redoing my house and other people do the same thing. People plant flowers. Our neighborhood starts to function like a community. It's the funniest thing, but it's effective."

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—Dr. Lisa V. Smith