

# UC BERKELEY WELLNESS LETTER: 20 Years and Still Going Strong

by Dale A. Ogar

*With its October 2003 issue, the UC Berkeley Wellness Letter enters its 20th year of publication. Dale Ogar, who has been the Wellness Letter's managing editor since its inception, reflects on the publication's history and accomplishments.*

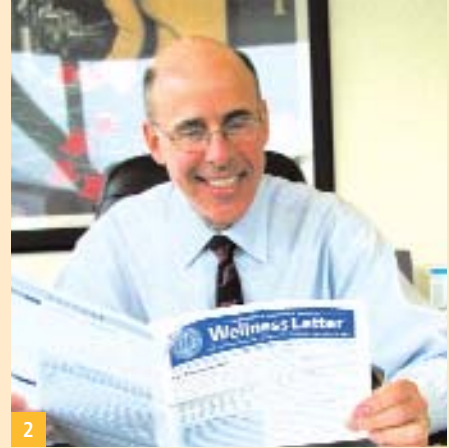
In the spring of 1982, Sheldon Margen, now professor emeritus of public health, received a visit from Rodney Friedman, owner of a small publishing company in New York City. Rodney and his partner, Richard Benson, had an idea for a monthly newsletter on health. Their plan was to compete directly with the *Harvard Medical Letter*, the best known health newsletter published at that time. Harvard's publication came from its medical school and focused on medical problems; Berkeley's would come from the School of Public Health and would concentrate on health promotion and disease prevention.

The idea of a national health newsletter from the School of Public Health was unprecedented and required strong, persuasive efforts to convince the faculty and the University of its value. Sheldon Margen and Joyce Lashof (the recently arrived dean) believed it was worth exploring and backed this with tremendous enthusiasm. The faculty became convinced, the University administration became convinced, and the *University of California, Berkeley Wellness Letter* was born.

At that time, public/private partnerships were rare at UC, and when the *Wellness Letter* received a license to use the University's name and seal, it was a major breakthrough for the kinds of financial relationships that would become



1 The *Wellness Letter's* first issue; 2 John Swartzberg, chair of the editorial board; 3 (Left to right) Dale Ogar, Sheldon Margen, Rodney Friedman, and Joyce Lashof celebrate the *Wellness Letter's* 15th anniversary; 4 Sheldon Margen (left) and Dale Ogar.

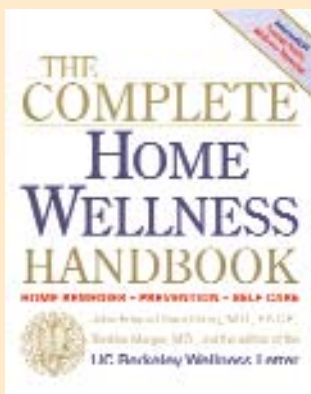
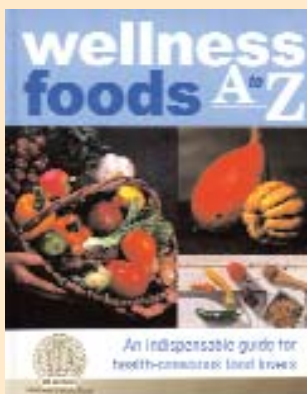


commonplace in later years. In negotiating the original contract, we decided against a profit sharing relationship and opted for a percentage of gross subscription and book receipts. As a result, in both good and bad economic times, the school has continued to receive income from the *Wellness Letter*.

In Rodney Friedman's New York office, a staff was assembled to carry out the preliminary literature searches, write first drafts of proposed articles, provide appropriate backup material for each article, and carry out the mechanical process of producing and distributing the *Wellness Letter* each month. That original group of writers and researchers is still with us today, providing a continuity and cohesiveness for everything that we do. The importance of their talents and skills is impossible to overstate. To their numbers have been added many

individuals who provide marketing and technical support. In Berkeley we put together an editorial board composed of School of Public Health faculty and started the process of developing ideas and designing a review process that is still in use today.

The fact that this newsletter is alive and well after almost 20 years can be credited to the hard work of some real visionaries within the school. Sheldon Margen and Joyce Lashof are still active in the day-to-



This year the *Wellness Letter* published a series of new books on food, nutrition, and home wellness.

day operation of the *Wellness Letter*, as are some of the original members of the editorial board. In 2001 Sheldon Margen retired, and we were fortunate to have John Swartzberg take over the leadership of the editorial board. John is a clinical professor and now also director of the Joint Medical Program in the school. He had served for many years as a member of the editorial board and shared the vision held by the founders. We look forward to many more years under his stewardship.

As we begin our 20th year, we have been successful far beyond our original expectations. In 1984 when our first issue was published, the word “wellness” was virtually unknown. Our newsletter gave stature to the concept of wellness, which now, not only has a place in the dictionary, but also in every aspect of the health care system. Our circulation has grown from an initial group of about 28,000 to approximately 400,000. We estimate that each issue is read by some one million individuals. Our renewal rate is among the highest in the industry at approximately 85 percent. We have also published 11 books, each of which has sold tens of thousands of copies. In addition, the *Wellness Letter* has been translated into several foreign languages and is sold overseas in a number of countries.

The school has earned more than \$10 million from *Wellness Letter* royalties since 1984, from which more than 1,000 students have received direct financial aid in the form of scholarships and instructorships. Student organizations and groups dedicated to furthering minority recruitment of students have been funded. Travel funds have been made available to allow students to attend professional meetings. The school’s Office of External Relations has received important funding, which it has, in turn, used to raise approximately three dollars for student support for every *Wellness* dollar received. Half of the royalties received have been placed in an endowment established in the name of Sheldon Margen to ensure that the students in the school will be supported in perpetuity.

Before he agreed to participate in forming the newsletter, Sheldon Margen insisted on two things: all the funds received by the school were to be used for student support, and the members of the editorial board would have total control over the content of the newsletter. These two conditions continue to be met to this day.

Our commitment to providing accurate, evidence-based analyses of the crucial health issues of our time still drives everything we do. Our first issue

contained articles about the cardiovascular benefits of running, plus exercise stress tests, warning about hair analysis frauds, dealing with tofu that’s gone bad, the pros and cons of nicotine chewing gum, backache, a guide to running shoes, how to recognize melanoma, icing an injury, and much more. All of these topics are still relevant today.

When the *Wellness Letter* began, few in the School of Public Health could have predicted that it would have such a great impact on so many readers and on the school itself. The students we support have gone forth to work in all areas of public health and to make positive changes around the globe. Thanks to partnership, perseverance, and strong leadership, this eight-page publication has now become one of the most widely read and highly respected health newsletters in the world. 🌐

To make a tax-deductible gift to the *Wellness Letter* Endowment in honor of Sheldon Margen, please make your check payable to the “Wellness Letter Endowment” and send it to the Office of External Relations and Development, 140 Warren Hall #7360, Berkeley, CA 94720-7360