Checking-In:

Dear Students, Alumni, and Friends
of the Interdisciplinary Program,

Another eventful year for the Interdisciplinary MPH Program. We continue to grow the program, and are strengthening pathways for students from the general UCB campus, the UCSF Schools of Nursing and Dentistry, Kaiser Permanente residency programs and a number of Bay Area public health fellowship programs. In addition to the wide selection of classes all over the UCB campus, our students can now draw from a growing portfolio of online public health classes, adding even more flexibility to their busy schedules.

We hope to see many of you at our annual get-together on Friday May 3, 2019, from 4 – 6 PM. We will mingle at the new School of Public Health, with a fabulous view of Berkeley and the Bay (5th Floor Emeritus Suite, SPH, 2121 Berkeley Way).

Anke Hemmerling, ’04, MD, PhD, MPH
Program Director
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In my career as a New York-based foreign bureau producer for International TV networks, I reported on hundreds of breaking news and human-interest stories. Fascinated by advances in DNA editing and the development of digital technologies in health, as well as being concerned about rising inequality and access to healthcare, I focused on health and environment beat reporting.

But journalism often looks for sensationalism. To get a juicy soundbite and a good media exposure, reporters often resort to pushing and squeezing characters too hard, while public health has a gentler approach and cares about little things that matter. This at some point became more appealing to me, and motivated my decision to apply for the MPH program at the UC Berkeley School of Public Health.

The start was challenging. The summer introductory courses to basic epidemiology and biostatistics were intimidating — such a steep learning curve giving my non-technical background! But I promised myself if I could survive the summer, I would dive deeper into statistical analysis. And I did! I loaded my fall and spring semesters with epidemiology, big data and multivariate analysis classes and my head keeps spinning from the influx of new information. But there is so much data out there in the net waiting to be discovered! And while so challenging, it is so interesting to learn all the nitty-gritty about it!
Cont’d: Student Update
Julia Vassey, MJ, MPH
Candidate 2019

My masters’ thesis is focused on social media posts’ analysis related to e-cigarette consumption aka vaping. Nicotine vaping brands have found their niche on Instagram, advertising e-cigarette products through user-generated content. E-cigarettes have been promoted as a safer alternative to traditional tobacco smoking, but according to the Center for Diseases Control and Prevention (CDC), e-cigarette aerosol is not harmless, and is considered to be a public health epidemic among youth in the US. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has recently launched ‘The Real Cost’ Youth E-Cigarette Prevention Campaign on social media. It aims at educating 12-17-year-old Americans about the health risks of vaping, but will the regulators succeed when the same platform which promotes vaping for youth is being used to deter it?

In an attempt to help answer this question, and because the role of social media in public health has captivated my interest, I’m conducting a cross-sectional study of perceptions and worldwide distribution of vaping posts on Instagram. I am applying all the knowledge I gained during the MPH training to draw statistical inferences from social media posts, which include the application of traditional liner and logistic regression models, as well as more novel techniques like text sentiment and deep learning image analysis. Oh, data science! I’m getting better and better with R coding to help me go implement all the tasks and even exploring some Python. I definitely hope these skills will help me move further in my research and health communication career.

One of the most amazing features about the program is that it is so flexible and open to students’ choices. Only three breadth mandatory classes, with the rest being electives, which means students are free to choose whichever direction they want: be it data analysis or qualitative research or health interventions or environmental health science. Freedom is not only limited to class choices.

The program is designed to help connect students with external mentors and organizations to collaborate on a thesis project. It means students can have a hands-on, real-world research experience while studying. I - just like many other of my fellow students - went through the whole process of the IRB application. I have conducted research from scratch being mentored by both the program instructors and a UC Berkeley research center that is working with me on my social media study.

The MPH seminar that helps students navigate through their final projects are wonderful. Always interesting guests, very friendly atmosphere and snacks on Friday afternoons – a time when the seminars are held. I’m very much enjoying my experience here and will miss every minute of it when I graduate!

And, looking at a bigger picture, public health is not so different from journalism as I initially thought after all. Many similarities! You pose and answer your research question just like you do in journalism, you interview data just like you interview characters and you try to present your findings in a clear and concise manner – just like in a good tradition of storytelling in journalism.
What led me to the Interdisciplinary MPH Program at Berkeley? Not long ago, I remember asking myself questions: What values are guiding me? What type of world do I wish to move towards? And what energizes me to persist through challenges? Considering these and similar questions, I saw clearly that I wanted to better understand the causes of suffering and to discover methods that would foster true health and wellbeing. This inquiry led me to a Preventive Medicine position at the California Department of Public Health. In this program, I had the opportunity to choose from several sites in California to pursue a MPH and, after careful consideration, I selected the Interdisciplinary Program at UC Berkeley.

I walked into this program with clear awareness of what I value and openness to where I might go. I am naturally drawn to identifying, exploring and addressing root causes of problems. This inclination was handy years ago when I was troubleshooting computers, network issues and code. During my training as a physician, this drive matured into a large question: How can we support people outside of hospital and clinic settings? Recognizing that behavioral, social and structural factors impact people’s health, I questioned what might be missing from our traditional approach. Looking for answers, I saw gaps that made it difficult for me to construct a complete picture. My awareness of ways in which health risks are associated with people’s circumstances and can perpetuate their marginalization in society deeply affected me and motivated me to learn more.
My experience in the Interdisciplinary MPH Program over the past year has played an important role in filling the gaps. The basic structure of the program has expanded my knowledge about research methods, health systems, upstream determinants of health, environmental health, and community engagement. While students have the option to pursue a single area of focus, a core feature of the interdisciplinary program is the freedom to adapt coursework to the individual’s own interests, goals, and values. This flexibility has greatly enriched my experience by allowing me to explore intersections between public health and other fields. I have eagerly pursued opportunities to cross-pollinate with multiple disciplines, ways of thinking, framing, and communicating as I have interacted with diverse faculty and students across the MPH program and the broader University. Through deep dialog in these interactions, I have juggled many perspectives about the social determinants of health and possible high impact approaches to address them. These connections and conversations with colleagues have been extraordinarily valuable in helping me develop a more complete picture.

I would characterize my experience in the MPH program as an adventure exploring unknown terrain and gaining a sense of what’s out there, what fits, and what does not. I have discovered that fostering health through prevention evolves as a multidisciplinary endeavor, requiring skills and relationships in many domains. Having undertaken this rapid exploration over the past several months, I now realize that gaps cannot be filled through personal effort alone. It takes more than knowledge and technical skills; it takes leadership abilities and self-understanding. I also see that collaboration is paramount for addressing systemic challenges. An encouraging mentor or professor, an inspired conversation, and even a sense of belonging to a supportive group... each of these has helped fill a key gap by shaping both my sense of self and my professional trajectory toward being the type of person who actively seeks to engage collaboratively with others within and across disciplines to face these big challenges and develop meaningful solutions.

Join us for the Annual Interdisciplinary MPH Party!

Date: Friday May 3, 2019 (4 – 6 PM)
Location: School of Public Health, 2121 Berkeley Way, 5th Floor Emeritus Suite
When I reflect on my time in the Interdisciplinary MPH program at UC Berkeley, I am filled with gratitude. Gratitude for the luxury of immersing myself in one of the premier universities in the world, brimming with talent, pushing the edge of research, and seated at a crossroads of innovation, technology, and social justice. Gratitude for my inspiring classmates in our cohort and the flexibility and dedication of our program advisors Drs. Anke Hemmerling and Phuoc Le. Gratitude for the opportunity to move to California and for the experience of exploring the west. Gratitude for the possibilities and perspective my time at UC Berkeley provided me. Every day, as both a veterinarian and an ordinary human trying to be a good steward of the planet, I use knowledge I gained during my MPH year at Berkeley. I only wish I'd been there longer!

After I completed my MPH, I stayed in the Bay Area for just over a year, working as a small animal emergency relief veterinarian and looking for the right position. While I was antsy to start “using” my new degree, I was searching for a relatively niche position in international agricultural development, specifically working at the livestock, animal source foods and human nutrition interface. During my time at Berkeley, I took classes in maternal and child health and nutrition with Drs. Ndola Prata and Lia Fernald. I loved these classes, and while for some classmates a veterinarian in their mix surprised them, for me it made total sense. In 2014, the world was beginning the shift from the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals, with growing attention to the importance of nutrition in the first 1000 days of a child’s life for improved growth and intellectual development. In many parts of the world, adding a small amount of animal source food (i.e. milk, meat or eggs) goes a long way to improving the macro and micronutrient content of a mostly cereal based diet. For healthy, safe animal source foods, you need healthy livestock. It seemed intuitive for a veterinarian to be engaged and conversant about nutrition, food systems, and global health topics.
In 2015, I was awarded a Mickey Leland Fellowship with the Congressional Hunger Center, which places fellows with different organizations working in international agriculture, food security, and nutrition. The fellowship is two years; the first year in the field and the second year in your host organization’s policy office, working on field informed policy work. I soon found myself moving to Lilongwe, Malawi where I was placed with Land O’Lakes International Development (yes, the butter company; they have an affiliated international development non-profit arm). There I joined their Livestock for Resilience program, a USAID-Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance funded project working to build small holder farmer household resilience to disasters, such as climate shocks like droughts and floods, through livestock. I quickly had to learn to be a poultry and goat veterinarian, made lasting friendships with my Malawian co-workers and two other Leland fellows placed in Malawi, and fell in love with the region. My program mentor at Land O’Lakes was particularly interested in ways to improve nutrition-sensitive livestock programming, so in addition to providing technical support for the project I also researched the pathways of impact livestock have on nutrition and food security. I also had the opportunity to shadow several other livestock and multi-sectoral nutrition and water/sanitation/hygiene programs in Malawi, as well as work with the National Rural Poultry Centre, government veterinarians and community animal health workers. I was also fortunate to work with experts (and professional heroes) at the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), based in Nairobi, and the University of Sydney. During the first year of my fellowship, I was able to put into practice a lot of what I’d learned during my MPH in tandem with my veterinary knowledge. I’d also taken Quantitative Survey Design, and Global Leadership in the Hass MBA program. I continually draw on knowledge gained in these classes, but they were particularly relevant during my time in Malawi.

After a year in Malawi, I relocated to Washington, D.C., where I spent the second year of my fellowship focused on coordinating a year-long learning series in Livestock, Animal Source Foods, and Household Nutrition, in collaboration with ILRI, the International Food Policy Research Institute, and USAID. I also provided technical support to several of Land O’Lakes International Development’s livestock and nutrition programs and contributed to several successful proposal writing efforts.

Immediately after I finished my Leland Fellowship, I had the professional opportunity of a lifetime to join the One Health Institute (OHI), which sits within the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of California, Davis. As a field veterinarian with the OHI, I contribute to a diverse portfolio of projects, including working with the UCGHI Planetary Health Center of Expertise. I provide technical support to several international research programs, including the USAID-PREDICT 2 viral disease discovery project in Ethiopia and Tanzania and a Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Livestock Systems project in Ethiopia. Daily, I draw on my public health training in epidemiology, biostatistics, survey design, qualitative research, and global leadership. I also help coordinate RxOne Health, a month-long core competency-based experiential course hosted by UC Davis, Sokoine University of Agriculture and Ifakara Health Institute in Tanzania. The course attracts graduate students and early career professionals from a wide variety of backgrounds from around the world. Curating a curriculum where we delve into a huge array of One Health topics while exploring amazing landscapes, interacting with communities, and building lasting relationships is immensely rewarding and a lot of fun. Livestock sit squarely in the middle of contentious conversations including climate change, antimicrobial resistance, water usage, healthy sustainable diets and food security; my clinical veterinary knowledge coupled with public health training serves me well to be an engaged and informed contributor to globally critical topics.

I remain in awe at the breadth and quality of the education, research, professors, and students at UC Berkeley. I’m inspired when I read the monthly updates from the School of Public Health and learn about the latest research findings and new programs or initiatives. I’m proud to be an Interdisciplinary MPH graduate, and the very nature of the program with the vast latitude I had in crafting a personalized curriculum and the enthusiastic mentorship by Dr. Hemmerling greatly contributed to an enriching year that continues to shape my professional trajectory and personal perspective.
I grew up in Berkeley, and while I recognized that UC Berkeley was an amazing institution, I never imagined I would study in my hometown. I graduated from Berkeley High feeling far from ready to attend a university. I have always loved science and after exploring various interests in junior college, I decided to apply to Mills College, where I received a bachelorette degree in Environmental Science. My experience at Mills taught me to excel as a student and helped me find my voice and confidence. It did not, however, lead me to a career path. After a brief internship with the Environmental Protection Agency, I began to feel that I may be better suited to health sciences. In 2001, I was thrilled to have my first child and in 2007, his sister was born. While having a family is amazing, it is challenging to balance home life and career pursuits. Living in the Bay Area forced me to be realistic about financial challenges. I considered being either a medical doctor or a dentist. After interviewing professionals in the field, I found the dental hygienists seemed generally happy with their work and were able to strike a balance between raising a family and having a lucrative and stimulating career.
I was thrilled to be accepted into the Dental Hygiene program at the UCSF School of Dentistry. After completing a strenuous academic and clinical curriculum, I received my second bachelorette degree in Dental Hygiene. I completed my State and National board exams and began an 11-year career as a clinical dental hygienist in private practice. I loved working with patients as a preventive care provider through direct client services and oral health education. However, I missed the academic environment. When asked to return to UCSF as an Assistant Clinical Professor, I gratefully accepted. I worked with first- and second-year dental students, teaching periodontal instrumentation, local anesthesia and nitrous oxide sedation. I continued to work in private practice, joining a large Clinical Based Research Network to validate the caries risk assessment tool know as CAMBRA, developed at UCSF.

My enthusiasm for clinical research was evident to my colleagues who encouraged me to apply for my Master of Science in Dental Hygiene at UCSF. I was accepted into my first accelerated masters program designed for hygienists interested in research or academia. I designed and implemented a clinical research study with the Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery Department, investigating a possible association between periodontal disease and bisphosphonate associated osteonecrosis of the jaw. While I was certainly passionate about research, I graduated feeling deflated as I returned to clinical dental hygiene. It seemed that in order to pursue a career in clinical research, I would have to get a PhD. I was not sure I could manage another 5-7 years in school with the financial constraints of raising a family. If I was going to apply for a PhD program, I needed to develop a stronger foundation in epidemiology. Clinical research began to feel as if it was missing that third dimension, something beyond the causal chain of epidemiological studies. These notions attracted me to the Interdisciplinary MPH Program at UC Berkeley.

I was terrified to quit both of my long-time jobs in private practice to begin my second accelerated Masters. My daughter told me I was too old to go to UC Berkeley, but my experience there would prove otherwise. I was thrilled to have the opportunity to take classes from a variety of disciplines and pushed myself to think outside of the box. I took classes from a variety of departments, and Health and Human Rights, Biological Embedding of Social Experiences, Epidemiology of Infectious Disease, Environmental and Occupational Epidemiology, were among my favorites. My only regret was that I wanted to take more classes than was possible in eleven months.

Having struggled before with the time constraints of participating in a research study in an accelerated program, I immediately reached out to my colleagues at UCSF. There was a smaller arm of a larger study, Examining smokeless tobacco characteristics and relationships with perceptions and behaviors among rural adolescent males. It was my first qualitative study, so I selected classes for my final semester that would inform this experience, including Qualitative Research Methodology and Community-Based Participatory Research. After graduation, I continued to work with the research team developing two publications which were accepted by peer reviewed journals.

As the end of the program approached, the doomed feeling of ‘what will I do next’ resonated. I was inspired by my professors of Health and Human Rights to apply for the Human Rights Fellowship through the law school. In my application I successfully argued that oral health is part of overall health and therefore should be considered a human right. I was delighted to receive the fellowship and a stipend that would support a summer of research. A professor at UC Berkeley connected me with an epidemiologist from the San Francisco Public Health Department, and I began attending their Evaluation Team Meetings for their Strategic Plan for Oral Health. I was tasked with designing a focus group to investigate the oral health disparities evident in the children of San Francisco’s Chinatown. Using principles of Community-Based Participatory Research, I developed a grandparent caregiver focus group that was culturally sensitive and designed to explore perceptions around oral health and barriers to accessing dental care. While I left the project prior to implementation, the focus group eventually received grant funding.

These experiences enabled me to gain full-time employment with the Alameda County Office of Dental Health. I spend my days writing, doing research, educating dental and medical providers, designing, implementing and evaluating programs that increase access and decrease barriers to oral health care. I can finally say I love my work!
I am delighted to be in my second year of leading the Interdisciplinary MPH program with Dr. Anke Hemmerling. I myself graduated from the 1-year MPH program over 30 years ago, and it’s been an honor to return to share my professional expertise. As a student, I greatly valued the stimulating discussions and collaborations with fellow students and faculty members. Now, as a faculty member, I aim to promote a similarly stimulating and collaborative environment in the program.

Here’s a quick overview of my career: I am a physician with training in pediatrics, preventive medicine and public health, with a focus on maternal-child health. Over the past few decades, I’ve aimed to integrate medicine and public health, and reduce child health disparities, through working as a physician in community health clinics, public health program administrator, consultant to Head Start and other early childhood programs, and writer for a parenting website. After working in the community for a decade, I had the opportunity to return to UC Berkeley to teach and conduct research. For the past two decades, I’ve been a professor at UC Berkeley School of Public Health teaching medical students in the UC Berkeley-UCSF Joint Medical Program, and graduate and undergraduate public health courses. I’ve also been a researcher associated with Health Research for Action Center, collaborating on a handful of child health projects and serving as principal investigator for studies on child nutrition and oral health in El Salvador, Ecuador, Vietnam, Nepal and India, in which we’ve engaged hundreds of undergraduate and graduate students. In addition, as a Fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics, I participate in child health advocacy locally, statewide, nationally and globally.

Having worked throughout my career with transdisciplinary and interprofessional teams — including physicians, public health professionals, dentists, nurses, nutritionists, social workers, teachers, and media experts — I feel completely at home in the Interdisciplinary MPH program with students and faculty with diverse personal and professional backgrounds, perspectives and expertise. I’ve been delighted to see our students construct their own curricula through a wide variety of classes in the School of Public Health and across the university, and develop and complete their own year-long capstone projects. I’m very excited to be part of a learning community in which students and faculty all learn from each other.

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