

# COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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## School of Public Health Works to Heal the World

By BENJAMIN RYAN

*Spectator Contributing Writer*

In a group of scattered buildings five subway stops north of the Morningside Heights campus lies one of Columbia's least known but most respected graduate schools.

The Joseph L. Mailman School of Public Health, so-named after a \$33 million donation from the Mailman Foundation, is a world class institution which provides a base for a wide range of research on local, regional, and international public health issues.

Founded in 1919, this division of Columbia University is one of 27 accredited schools of public health in the country. Its current research includes a search for the cause of a disproportionately high rate of breast cancer in Long Island and a study on the effects of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

The school recently became the focus of national attention after the Mailman Foundation's gift, the largest ever to a school of public health.

"The School ... brings so many disciplines together." said Mailman's daughter, Jody Wolfe. "When our family learned the scope of the School's work in community health, we became intrigued with the possibility of helping it do more."

Currently there are over 700 masters and doctoral degree candidates at the school in the fields of Biostatistics, Environmental Health Sciences, Epidemiology, General Public Health, Health Policy and Management, Population and Family Health, and Sociomedical Sciences.

Graduates go on to an array of careers in health management, policy, program development, research, and teaching, among others. They currently serve international agencies such as the World Health Organization and UNICEF; they work for national private organizations like the March of Dimes and

Planned Parenthood; and they provide guidance for policy in governmental departments and national HMO's.

While focusing on issues of health, administrators at the school distinguish its curriculum and purpose from that of a school of medicine.

"Whereas clinical medicine focuses on curing the individual, public health is in the interest of preventing disease and promoting health," Vice Dean for Academic Affairs Andrew R. Davidson said. All of the school's 140 faculty members research in the interest of this broad goal. In some cases, the school implements programs stemming from their own research, helping students learn the full scope of their studies.

The School of Public Health's buildings share space with a bustling urban environment. As a part of the School's vast health improvement efforts, they have implemented a strong health component into the junior high schools in Washington Heights. Outreach workers target these youth as being at significant risk for depression, pregnancy and STD's, and asthma.

"We have taken the school nurse to a new level," Davidson said, commenting on the increased need for medical care in schools today.

The School is currently studying the apparently disproportionately high rate of breast cancer cases in Long Island. Researchers are working both to establish that this statistic is accurate and find answers to which aspect of life in the area leads to the presence of the disease. Current speculation focuses on Long Island's roots as a farming community. It is possible that the area's only water aquifer has been contaminated with agricultural pesticides, which in turn have lead to an influx of cancer.

Internationally, the US. Department of

Energy has funded the School to do the largest study ever of the carcinogenic effects of the Chernobyl radiation disaster. Professors are working with collaborators in the Ukraine on this five to 10 year study. They hope the outcome will yield greater understanding of the relationship between radiation exposure and specific types of cancer.

HIV and AIDS have fast become a main focus of the school's efforts. Researchers recently made a landmark discovery, linking the Herpes virus to Kaposi's sarcoma, a serious cancer complication common in AIDS patients.

The School will conduct the largest federally funded study on the spread of HIV in Uganda. Researchers hope to uncover the reason for the country's devastatingly high incidence of HIV and AIDS in hopes of implementing strong prevention efforts. In addition to field research, the team will focus efforts there on other STDs like syphilis and gonorrhea, curable diseases which can increase the likelihood of the transmission of HIV.

In a country where AIDS goes almost completely untreated due to lack of medical resources, the School fights an uphill battle to prevent further infection.

The School currently has an annual budget of about \$50 million and an endowment of about \$24 million. It will use the expanded financial resources for faculty support, financial aid, and for the School's public health programs and research, including those aforementioned, as well as programs involving health care for the poor, community and household violence, environmental degradation, and women's reproductive health.