

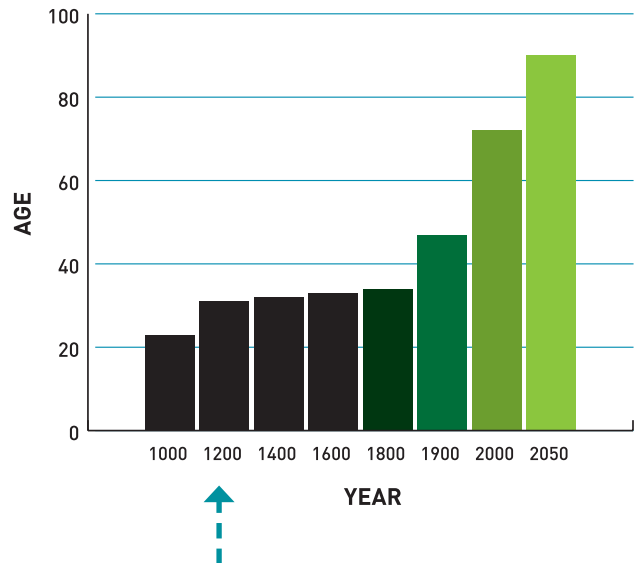
GRANTING WISHES FOR GOOD HEALTH

by Karen Burbach

"A PERSON WHO HAS HEALTH HAS A THOUSAND WISHES, THE PERSON WHO DOESN'T, HAS BUT ONE."

ANONYMOUS





It took science and medicine 900 years to raise the **life expectancy** of humans from 25 to nearly 50 years. By 1900, a person could expect to live less than 50 years. More than a century later, that expectation had risen to 78. Now, UNMC’s new College of Public Health is poised to help Nebraskans live even longer, healthier lives.

Not many people remember polio anymore.

Those who do recall how terrified parents in the 1940s and 50s were as the unpredictable and enigmatic disease killed, crippled or confined children to an iron lung.

Although no cure was found, a public health breakthrough occurred in 1955 when the Salk vaccine was shown to be effective in preventing the disease.

Today, polio is an all-but-forgotten disease and a poster child to boast 20th century triumphs in public health.

Health matters to us all. With it, thousands of wishes fill our heads. Without it, we have only one.

Public health – whether we realize it or not – is the genie that helps grant wishes for a longer, healthier life. Already, it has extended our life span, lowered infant and child mortality rates and eradicated such communicable diseases as smallpox.

Now, the creation of a new College of Public Health at UNMC is poised to grant even more wishes.

“The college has tremendous potential to truly make a difference for all the citizens of Nebraska,” said Jay Noren, M.D., dean of the College of Public Health. “It is a thrill to be on the ground floor of this landmark event.”

UNMC has the only public health college in Nebraska and the

only one in a large north central section of the country, spanning 1,400 miles east and west and 800 miles north and south – from the University of Iowa to the University of Washington, and the University of Minnesota to the University of Oklahoma.

“The College of Public Health is the last jewel in UNMC’s crown to be a full academic health science center,” said UNMC Chancellor Harold M. Maurer, M.D. “A college of public health is different than almost every other college, in that, it’s not just faculty and students, but hospital administrators, chief medical officers, government and public health systems.”

Essentially, the public health team works to prevent disease in populations, as opposed to medicine that works to cure disease in individuals who already are ill.

Building a new college is no small feat.

Lyndon Johnson was president the last time UNMC opened a new college in 1968. That same year, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated and the cost of a first-class stamp rose to 6-cents. Dr. Noren, meanwhile, was in his second year at the University of Minnesota Medical School.

Fast forward 39 years to Jan. 19 when – less than six months after the University of Nebraska Board of Regents approved its establishment – the College of Public Health became fully operational with Dr. Noren at the helm.

It was a landmark event for the state. Only 38 of the country's 125 academic medical centers have accredited schools or colleges of public health. UNMC's college will be the 39th when it is fully accredited in about three years.

"Opportunities like this hardly ever happen," said Dr. Noren, who left a four-year post as executive vice president and provost at the University of Nebraska to become founding dean. "Support for the college has been extensive and impressive."

All the pieces were in place.

UNMC had an accredited master's degree of public health program with the University of Nebraska at Omaha. The Nebraska Public Health Laboratory at UNMC is one of the few state public health laboratories located on an academic medical center campus. In addition, UNMC's mission is to improve the health of Nebraskans, particularly underserved populations.

During the past year, Dr. Noren's roadmap has taken him to hundreds of one-on-one meetings with key public health players. "I lost track at 70 people," he said.

In the end, those conversations focused UNMC's College of Public Health on four areas:

- Health promotion and disease prevention – emphasizing major problems including childhood obesity prevention, smoking cessation, cardiovascular fitness and employee wellness programs.
- Environmental health and safety – with an emphasis on agricultural health, addressing prevention of problems such as lung disease from agricultural dust exposure, ag injuries related to repetitive motion and machinery and exposure to chemicals in the agricultural environment.
- Economical and efficient health care delivery – with an emphasis on health workforce, health disparities and improved delivery methods.
- Biosecurity, biopreparedness and emerging infectious diseases – addressing such major risks to the population as bioterrorism and potential epidemics such as avian flu.

While anchored at UNMC, the college will stretch 500-miles across the state and engage experts in fields from nursing, public administration and education to government, behavioral sciences, social work and law, said Dr. Noren, whose public health graduate education was at Harvard University School of Public Health.

"Collaboration and an interdisciplinary approach will be one of our hallmarks," he said.

Already, the college brings together UNMC faculty, staff, programs, space and budgets of: the Department of Preventive and Societal Medicine, the Rural Health Education Network, the

Health Professions Tracking Center, Center for Health Services Research (including Centers for Rural Health Research and Rural Health Policy Analysis), Center for Health Disparities, and the medical center's components of the Center for Biosecurity and Center for Biopreparedness Education.

In addition to granting health wishes, UNMC's public health genie will help rebuild the country's workforce.

About 80 percent of more than 400,000 public health workers have no formal public health education and at least 50 percent of the federal, state and local public health workforce is eligible to retire in the next five years.

"We need lots of new people," said Harrison Spencer, M.D., M.P.H., who works with 38 accredited public health institutions

"Collaboration and an interdisciplinary approach will be one of our hallmarks."

– Jay Noren, M.D.

as president of The Association of Schools of Public Health in Washington, D.C. "UNMC's College of Public Health has an almost immediate and real impact in meeting the workforce needs for the state."

Joann Schaefer, M.D., chief medical officer for the Nebraska Health and Human Services System, agreed. "One of the most difficult challenges facing our state today is ensuring there are enough people to respond to public health threats," she said. "The UNMC College of Public Health will bring much-needed people into our public health pipeline."

There also is the potential for a substantial economic impact, Dr. Maurer said. Among the current 38 colleges of public health nationally, the average external grant funding is \$38 million. As the new UNMC College of Public Health develops, its external grant funding will increase and could result in as much as \$30 million in new funds resulting in a \$67.5 million boon to the state's economy, which equates to about 700 to 750 new jobs.

UNMC's planned investment in establishing the College of Public Health is estimated at approximately \$12 million in the first five years.

"It's an exciting venture by the university," said Dr. Spencer, noting there have been 10 new colleges or schools accredited since 2000, three more that will be vying for accreditation in the next three years and 15 others, including UNMC, who have



developed or expressed interest in developing colleges. “Making it a free-standing part of the university requires vision and dedication. A college of public health is very multidisciplinary and needs to collaborate to carry out its mission.”

Together with high research productivity, colleges work with communities to “translate research into action and policy,” Dr. Spencer said.

In partnership with the college, he said, Nebraskans can expect a “vigorous public health agenda,” in research, training and service.

For Myles Jones, a master’s level student in public health, the college allows him to remain in Nebraska, while teaching at Omaha Central High School.

He’s anxious to be part of the first class of doctoral students and help individuals on the Santee reservation, where he grew up, with their public health needs.

“Now, I won’t have to uproot my family and move to Iowa or Oklahoma to pursue my doctorate,” Jones said. “I can stay home, continue my education and my children can stay in school here.”

While the college fulfills Jones’s wishes, Dr. Noren has his own:

- Launching three new doctoral programs by the fall of 2008: Health Services Research/Health Administration, Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Research, and Environmental Health.
- A new building for the college, which is the top priority on UNMC’s facilities expansion plan.
- Recruiting 10 new faculty members in the next two years and 20 in the next four years.

In addition, the College of Public Health plans to provide several expanded areas of specialization in the existing master of public health program with UNO. These expanded areas include biostatistics/epidemiology, health promotion/disease prevention, and environmental health, which will be additions to the existing specializations in community health education and public health administration.

“This new college will be paying ongoing dividends to our city, our state, the region and the nation,” said John Christensen, Ph.D., UNO chancellor. “Public health practice is important to us all. The work and research in the college will contribute to overall better health and to the potential reduction in costs for critical care.”

In 2001, a new era of public health was born in Nebraska with the passage of LB 692.

Over a relatively short period of time, the state went from 16 local health districts covering 22 counties, to 18 districts covering all 93 counties. UNMC’s new College of Public Health will result in a better trained workforce, said Richard Raymond, M.D., under secretary for food and safety, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and “therefore provide even better public health services to protect the health of Nebraskans and those visiting or passing through our great state.”

Rita Parris, executive director, Public Health Association of Nebraska, agrees. “The opening of the College of Public Health will be a critical factor as we address emerging public health threats.”

Whether that threat is avian flu, bioterrorism or obesity, UNMC’s College of Public Health undoubtedly will influence public health education, training, research and policy. For now, “it’s too early to be proud of anything,” Dr. Noren said. “There’s still a lot left to do to enhance the health of Nebraskans.” ∞∞