

Integrating Medicine and Public Health Through Health Professions Education at a School of Medicine and Public Health

Parvathy Pillai, MD, MPH; Wajih Akhtar, PhD, MPH; Stephen Bagwell, MA; Laura E. Birkeland, MS, CGC; James H. Conway, MD; Amanda DeVoss, MMS, PA-C; Maureen S. Durkin, PhD, DrPH; Ann Evensen, MD; Kjersti Knox, MD; Thomas Hahn, MD; Jeff Hartman, DPT, MPH; Joel Hill, MPAS, PA-C; Joseph P. Holt, MD; Kenneth MacMillan; Roberta Rusch, MPH; Elizabeth Salisbury-Afshar, MD, MPH; Christine Seibert, MD; Ajay K. Sethi, PhD; Shelly F. Shaw, MPH; Sweta Shrestha, MPH; Jennifer Timm, DNP, RN, PHN; Susan Wenker, PT, PhD, MS; Patrick L. Remington, MD, MPH; Elizabeth M. Petty, MD; Jonathan L. Temte, MD, PhD

A longstanding and recognized need exists to address the schism between medicine and public health and for health professions education to promote the training of clinicians skilled at addressing population health.^{1,2} One major effort within Wisconsin to address this call to better align public health and medical missions and improve health and health equity occurred two decades ago. On October 7, 2005, the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin (UW) System approved renaming UW-Madison “School of Medicine” to the “School of Medicine and Public Health” (SMPH).³ This date marked a seminal moment in the long process of expanding the school’s public health mission and better meeting the health needs of Wisconsinites.

With strong support and funding from the school and the Wisconsin Partnership Program

endowment,⁴ this change to become the nation’s first school of medicine and public health has focused on integrating public health and medicine across the school’s educational,

research, and service missions. Aligning with the Wisconsin Idea, which holds that “education should influence people’s lives beyond the boundaries of the classroom,”⁵ the educational goals of the transformation emphasized cross-disciplinary education and ensuring that SMPH students would be knowledgeable and

skilled in integrating biomedical, clinical, and population health sciences and that they would be trained in diverse community settings and prepared to promote population health and

The transformation...catalyzed numerous innovations that have propelled two decades of learners to be better equipped to address the health needs of both individuals and populations.

address social determinants of health inequities in their communities.⁶ These goals created a culture shift for faculty across SMPH as they identified ways to integrate medicine and public health in work with learners, new partners, curriculum development, and augmenting existing programs.

In this commentary, we summarize collective progress made toward the transformation’s educational goals and the integrated public health offerings across the five SMPH health professions degree programs, focusing on the history and growth of public health programming and considering strategies for the next decade.

Twenty Years Later

The transformation to a school of medicine and public health catalyzed numerous innovations that have propelled two decades of learners to be better equipped to address the health needs of both individuals and popu-

Author affiliations: Population Health Sciences, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health (UWSMPH), Madison, Wisconsin (Durkin, Pillai, Salisbury-Afshar; Sethi, Remington); Population Health Institute, UWSPH, Madison, Wisconsin (Akhtar); Community-Based Education Experiences, UWSMPH, Madison, Wisconsin (Bagwell); Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, UWSMPH, Madison, Wisconsin (Birkeland); Department of Pediatrics, UWSMPH, Madison, Wisconsin (Conway; Petty); Department of Medicine, UWSMPH, Madison, Wisconsin (DeVoss, Holt, Seibert); Department of Family Medicine and Community Health, UWSMPH, Madison, Wisconsin (Evensen, Hahn, Hartman, Hill, Knox, Salisbury-Afshar, Shaw, Temte, Wenker); Aurora Health Care, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Knox); Wisconsin Academy for Rural Medicine, UWSMPH, Madison, Wisconsin (Holt, MacMillan); Center for Interprofessional Practice and Education, UW-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin (Rusch); Master of Public Health Program, UWSMPH, Madison, Wisconsin (Shrestha); School of Nursing, UW-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin (Timm).

Corresponding author: Parvathy Pillai, MD, MPH, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, 4262 Health Sciences Learning Center, 750 Highland Ave, Madison, WI 53705; email ppillai@wisc.edu; ORCID ID 0000-0002-7341-1877

Table. Baseline Public Health Content and Examples of Public Health Educational Opportunities Available for Students Through University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health Health Professions Degree Programs

Program	Baseline Public Health Content in Degree Program	Examples of Potential Public Health Opportunities for Students
Doctor of Medicine (MD)	Longitudinal 4-year public health thread, including 12-week community-based service-learning project and a 4-credit public health requirement following the required clinical curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with a local community center to develop and deliver nutrition and health education to senior citizens during a required service-learning project • Take the pre-internship “Dementia and Public Health” course offered through the Department of Psychiatry • Participate in the POD-PH program, including co-leading a session on social isolation and health for peers
Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT)	Two 1-credit required public health-focused courses sequentially completed over the first 2 years (“Psychosocial Aspects of Health Care” and “Issues of Culture and Diversity in Health Care”) and completion of at least 20 hours of community-service learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage in service learning with a community organization and support efforts to connect the environment and health • Participate in an annual global health trip through OGH focused on community development, while also providing clinical care
Master of Physician Assistant Studies (MPAS)	Two 1-credit required public health-focused courses sequentially completed during the first year (“Clinical Prevention and Community Practice I and II”)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete the POD in Rural Health by completing the “Overview of Rural Medicine” elective, rotating in a rural clinic, and conducting a capstone project that supports a rural community organization in addressing health promotion
Master of Genetic Counselor Studies (MGCS)	Series of public health lectures and seminars embedded throughout curriculum and required rotation with Wisconsin State Lab of Hygiene	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete the Wisconsin Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities and Related Disabilities program to improve systems of care • Participate in the Interprofessional Practice and Education (IPE) POD, including community placements and IPE scholarly work with focus on public health initiatives
Master of Public Health (MPH)	42 credits of public health course work, including 11 required didactic courses, a 240-hour applied practice experience, and a required integrated learning experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with a public health department to assess vaccination trends as part of the MPH applied practice experience • Complete the Global Health Certificate through the OGH, including a field experience to understand the prevalence of renal disease in rural communities in India

Abbreviations: POD, path of distinction; PH, public health; OGH, Office of Global Health.

lations. Opportunities for integrated public health training now span across the training continuum and SMPH’s four clinical degree programs: the Doctor of Medicine (MD), Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT), Master of Genetic Counselor Studies (MGCS), and Master of Physician Assistant Studies (MPAS). The school’s fifth health professions degree program, the Master of Public Health (MPH), is the backbone of SMPH’s public health educational mission, providing curricular guidance, learner opportunities, and schoolwide expertise in public health content. Additionally, SMPH offers a Master of Science (MS) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) graduate program in population health. The program was created in 1997 and set the stage for the school’s subsequent transformation, with many of its content areas subsequently integrated into SMPH’s health professions curricula.

Public Health and SMPH Health Professions Degree Programs

The MPH program, established shortly after the school’s transformation, provides public health training both for students pursuing the MPH exclusively and for those completing it

in combination with another UW–Madison degree.

In addition to offering dual-degree options to learners, each of the four SMPH clinical degree programs has interwoven public health concepts into the required coursework through public lectures, dedicated courses, or integrated curricula. Topics include social and structural determinants of health and health equity, advocacy, systems thinking, culture, and identity—each in ways that highlight their clinical relevance. Further, although structured slightly differently, each of these health professions degree programs provide opportunities for students to engage with community partners and address health and determinants of health outside clinical settings (Table).

Additional Public Health Training Opportunities

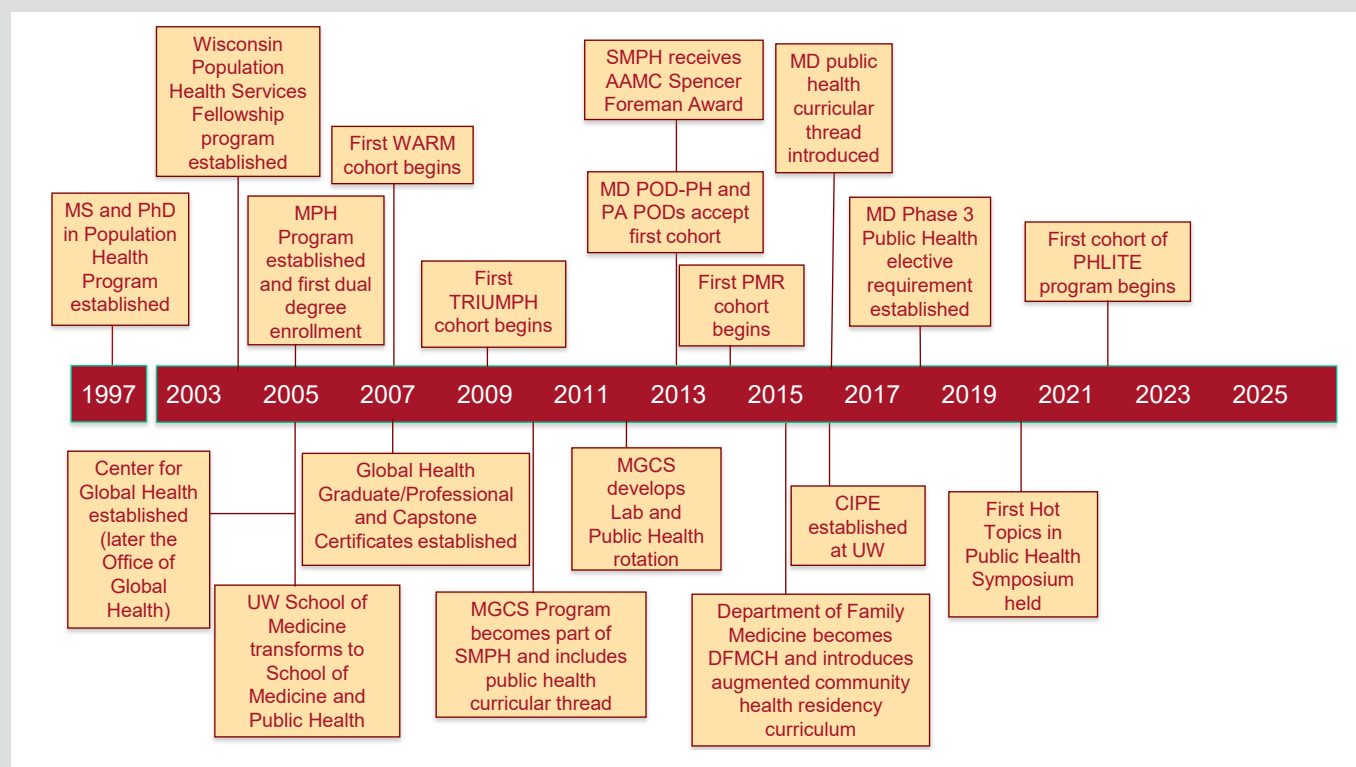
Beyond required coursework, SMPH students have numerous opportunities to engage in public health-related training. With appropriate planning, students can participate in multiple options simultaneously while pursuing their primary degree, essentially customizing their education to their own interests and career goals.

Students can participate in programming coordinated by the school’s Office of Global Health, including the global health certificate program.⁷ Programming meets many “glocal” objectives, meaning that lessons learned through caring for underserved patients and low-resourced communities in local settings can be applied globally and vice versa.

Students also may participate in one of several co-curricular “pathway programs” addressing key public health domains. The Interprofessional Practice and Education Path of Distinction⁸ is one of many educational programs offered by the UW–Center for Interprofessional Practice and Education. Students from any UW–Madison health science program can pursue this path to advance knowledge and skills in interprofessional competencies. MPAS students can participate in one of several public health-oriented Paths of Distinction,⁹ including population health, global health, rural health, tribal medicine, and addiction medicine. MD students can pursue the Path of Distinction in Public Health,¹⁰ which offers training that focuses on health equity, leadership, and community engagement.

Two immersive, SMPH community-based

Figure. Timeline of Key Events in the Integration of Medicine and Public Health Through Health Professions Education at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health



Abbreviations: AAMC, Association of American Medical Colleges; CIPE, Center for Interprofessional Practice and Education; DFMCH, Department of Family Medicine and Community Health; MD, Doctor of Medicine; MGCS, Master of Genetic Counselor Studies; MS, Master of Science; MPH, Master of Public Health; PA, physician assistant; PhD, Doctor of Philosophy, PH, public health; PHLITE, Public Health Leadership in Teaching and Engagement; POD, path of distinction; PMR, preventive medicine residency; SMPH, School of Medicine and Public Health; TRIUMPH, Training in Urban Medicine and Public Health; UW, University of Wisconsin-Madison; WARM, Wisconsin Academy for Rural Medicine.

programs are also available to MD students: the Wisconsin Academy for Rural Medicine (WARM)¹¹ and Training in Urban Medicine and Public Health (TRIUMPH).¹² Both programs include 2.5 years of clinical training at a regional campus and require completion of a community health improvement project relevant to their community site. WARM is an admissions-based program, with enrolled students receiving training throughout medical school that emphasizes clinical and community care in rural settings, including the three regional WARM campuses. TRIUMPH students are selected in their first year and subsequently complete a curriculum in Milwaukee designed to prepare them to address health disparities in urban centers by integrating public health into their practices.

Postgraduate Training Opportunities

Beyond programs available through the SMPH degree programs, the transformation has fostered growth in postgraduate public health

training. Established just before the school's restructuring, the Wisconsin Population Health Service Fellowship Program¹³ is a 2-year service and training program for early career individuals in public health and allied sciences. Through applied experience in practice-based settings across Wisconsin and curriculum focused on health equity and collaborative leadership, graduates can apply a health equity lens to future practice and skills in public health programming, systems thinking, and management.

The transformation also has led to augmented public health curriculum across several SMPH-affiliated graduate medical education programs. Examples include the family medicine residency¹⁴ housed in the Department of Family Medicine and Community Health and the preventive medicine residency (PMR)¹⁴ housed in the Department of Population Health Sciences. In addition to clinical training, family medicine residents complete a community health curriculum that includes a longitudinal seminar series, which fosters an understanding

of community health principles; a 3-week community health rotation that introduces community organizations, and a 2-year community health learning experience in which each resident works with a community partner to address community health priorities. The PMR is a graduate medical education program that focuses specifically on health promotion and disease prevention in communities and health systems. Residents complete MPH degree requirements, clinical rotations, and practice-based public health rotations, including work in governmental public health settings.

Professional development opportunities also exist for faculty. Public Health Leadership in Teaching and Engagement is a 7-month interprofessional training for faculty across SMPH clinical departments that provides continuing education on public health topics. Additionally, the biannual Hot Topics in Public Health symposium¹⁶ addresses key public health issues and is open to learners, faculty, and staff across SMPH campus and beyond.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Since the transformation into a school of medicine and public health, SMPH has made significant progress in establishing an integrated public health curriculum across educational programs (Figure). Moreover, programming has also expanded to support students who wish to extend their public health training beyond baseline degree requirements. In 2013, the school received the Association of American Medical College's annual "Spencer Foreman Award for Outstanding Community Engagement," due in large part to efforts stemming from this transformation.

These efforts have not been without challenges. A common challenge across programs is related to funding and sustainability, with public health-focused programming typically less resourced than clinically focused activities. While the public health programs established through the transformation have been maintained, they require dedicated resources and significant faculty and staff effort to sustain. Occasionally, programs require modification to better align with funding requirements. Moreover, many efforts associated with the transformation have occurred organically, and uniform measures of outcome were not tracked. Furthermore, time constraints—both in terms of weaving additional public health content into already dense health professions curricula and for students to fully engage in all available public health-related programming—have been a barrier.

Fortunately, opportunities remain to further the educational goals of the transformation. Shared program priorities include:

1. Improve coordination across programs to enhance interprofessional team-based learning that addresses foundational and emerging public health topics.
2. Facilitate community-service learning to better center community partners' priorities.
3. Establish an SMPH-level evaluation that measures improved educational outcomes of all programs with an emphasis on improved health outcomes across Wisconsin and beyond.

Despite the challenges and ongoing opportunities, 20 years after the start of the intentional integration of medicine and public health across SMPH educational programs, the pro-

cess has led to more than just the development of novel public health curriculum and programs. Graduates of the SMPH degree programs can be expected to apply a social-ecological lens and address issues at the individual, community, and systems levels—through education and patient advocacy, community partnerships and engagement, and improvements in health care and public health systems or policy change. These educational changes have the potential to create ripple effects, influencing faculty, staff, and community partners, and demonstrating the benefits of integrating public health and clinical activities to better improve individual and population health outcomes.

Today, SMPH continues to advance these goals through intentional commitment of the institution, including faculty, staff, learners, and community partners—a key element in ensuring the shared vision of "Healthy People and Healthy Communities."¹⁷ SMPH has established a strong foundation with robust curricula across degree programs and is well-positioned to remain an educational leader in addressing ongoing public health challenges.

Acknowledgements: The authors thank the Wisconsin Partnership Program for its vision and generous ongoing funding support of integrated medicine and public health education. AI was used for editing assistance for certain sections of this commentary.

Financial disclosures: James Conway, MD, has received scientific advisory honoraria from Moderna, Pfizer, Sanofi, Merck, and GSK and institutional research support from AstraZeneca, Moderna, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Funding/support: Elizabeth Salisbury-Afshar, MD, MPH, Parvathy Pillai, MD, MPH, and Patrick Remington, MD, MPH, receive support through a grant from the Health Services and Resources Administration for the UW Preventive Medicine Residency Program. Pillai also receives support from the Wisconsin Partnership Program (WPP) of the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health for efforts related to the MD curriculum, Path of Distinction in Public Health, and Public Health Leadership in Teaching. Christine Seibert, MD, received salary support through a strategic grant from the WPP for development of the integrated public health curriculum for all medical students.

REFERENCES

1. Fineberg HV. Public health and medicine where: the twain shall meet. *Am J Prev Med.* 2011;41(4 Suppl 3):S149-S151. doi:10.1016/j.amepre.2011.07.013
2. Ruis AR. Golden RN. The schism between medical and public health education: a historical perspective. *Acad Med.* 2008;83(12):p 1153-1157. doi:10.1097/ACM.0b013e31818c6583
3. New name for UW-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health reflects broader mission. Universities of Wisconsin. Oct. 7, 2005. Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://www.wisc.edu/news/archive/new-name-for-uw-madison-school-of-medicine-and-public-health-reflects-broader-mission/>
4. About. Wisconsin Partnership Program. Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://wpp.med.wisc.edu/about/>
5. Wisconsin Idea. University of Wisconsin—Madison. Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://www.wisc.edu/wisconsin-idea/>
6. Golden RN. An integrated school of medicine and public health—what does it mean?. *WMJ.* 2008;107(3):142-143.
7. Global Health Education Opportunities for all health professional students. University of Wisconsin-Madison. Office of Global Health. School of Medicine and Public Health. Updated March 5, 2026. Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://ogh.med.wisc.edu/education-opportunities-for-health-professional-students/>
8. Education. University of Wisconsin-Madison. UW Center for Interprofessional Practice and Education. Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://cipe.wisc.edu/education/#pod>
9. PA Electives. University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health. Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://www.med.wisc.edu/education/physician-assistant-pa-program/electives/>
10. Paths of Distinction. University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health. Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://www.med.wisc.edu/education/paths-of-distinction/#public-health>
11. Wisconsin Academy for Rural Medicine. University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health. Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://www.med.wisc.edu/education/md-program/warm/>
12. Training in Urban Medicine and Public Health. University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health. Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://www.med.wisc.edu/education/md-program/triumph/>
13. Wisconsin Population Health Service Fellowship. University of Wisconsin-Madison. Population Health Institute. Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://uwphi.pophealth.wisc.edu/wfdp/wisconsin-population-health-service-fellowship/>
14. Madison Family Medicine Residency Program. University of Wisconsin-Madison. Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/madison/>
15. Welcome to the Preventive Medicine Residency Program. University of Wisconsin-Madison. Preventive Medicine Residency. Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://preventivemedicine.pophealth.wisc.edu>
16. Hot Topics in Public Health. University of Wisconsin-Madison. SMPH Intranet. Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://intranet.med.wisc.edu/hot-topics-in-public-health/>
17. Mission, Vision and Values. University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health. Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://www.med.wisc.edu/about-us/mission-vision-values/>

advancing the art & science of medicine in the midwest

WMJ

WMJ (ISSN 2379-3961) is published through a collaboration between The Medical College of Wisconsin and The University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health. The mission of *WMJ* is to provide an opportunity to publish original research, case reports, review articles, and essays about current medical and public health issues.

© 2026 Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System and The Medical College of Wisconsin, Inc.

Visit www.wmjonline.org to learn more.