Global-Health Programs on the Rise in the U.S.

Universities respond to philanthropic efforts and a surge in student interest

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New York

About 100 students packed into a small theater at New York University this fall to listen to an obstetrician describe the abysmal conditions that kill one in 11 pregnant women each year in her native Chad.

The students, who include lawyers, physicians, social workers, and teachers, are enrolled in an interdisciplinary master's program in global public health. Their guest lecturer for the evening was Grace Kodindo, whose efforts to bring lifesaving drugs and medical equipment to maternity wards in her central African country was chronicled in the BBC documentary *Dead Mums Don't Cry*.

"It was so inspiring to see the power of one person to change the system," said Ricardo Restrepo-Guzman, a Colombian-born psychiatrist who is in his second year of the NYU program.

NYU, which started its program last year, is one of a growing number of universities that are responding to a surge in student demand for courses and programs in world health. NYU's students, all of whom have or are completing professional degrees in other fields, have begun their careers during a period of intense media and philanthropic attention to the stark health-care disparities between rich and poor countries.

Celebrity activists like Bono, Angelina Jolie, George Clooney, and Oprah Winfrey have kept those issues in the headlines. Many of the students flocking to public-health programs have experienced such disparities in their training to be nurses, teachers, dentists, and journalists, and are committed to finding long-term solutions to the problems.

Between 1995 and 2006, applications to global-health programs in the United States increased from 1,319 to 2,506, according to the Association of Schools of Public Health. The number of public-health schools grew from 27 to 39 during the same time, while the number of students graduating with master's degrees in international health soared 69 percent.

Applications to the international-health department at the Johns Hopkins University public-health school, for example, have roughly doubled over the past six years, to around 300. And enrollment in the international-health department of Boston University's School of Public Health has grown from 139 in 2003 to 211 students this year.

Experts say the growth is fueled by the realization that in an era of globalization, health threats like AIDS, SARS, and avian flu transcend national boundaries.
Students in these programs learn about preventing and treating diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, and cholera, and how cultural and social factors can increase health risks to vulnerable groups like refugees.

Course work includes both the theoretical and practical. Students might, for instance, study how to provide safe drinking water to a remote African village or to reduce urban violence among Latin American youth.

Many universities with global-health programs also run research centers devoted to the topic, and some are starting undergraduate majors and study-abroad trips to third-world countries.

Some of the growth in programs is being fueled by a surge in philanthropic support for international health. In June the University of Washington, which created a department of global health last year, announced that it had received a $105-million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation — part of the $8-billion the foundation has handed out for global-public-health programs over the past decade.

Some prospective students have also been inspired by Warren Buffett's $31-billion pledge last year to the Gates foundation, as well as other recent megagifts for global health.

"This extraordinary philanthropy is making it possible for us to do things we used to only dream of," said Karen P. Day, director of NYU's master's program in global public health and chair of the medical school's department of medical parasitology.

**A Cross-Disciplinary Approach**

While many world-health programs are located in schools of public health, NYU's is run by five professional schools: medicine, dentistry, social work, education, and public service.

"In some ways, not having a school of public health was an advantage because each program felt the culture of sharing and collaboration that might not have happened otherwise," said Robert Berne, senior vice president for health at NYU.

Ms. Day said the mix of students made for interesting class discussions. "I'm teaching medical residents and fellows, as well as people who have had no formal training in biology," she said. "They're not going to be genetic epidemiologists by the end of the semester, but they should be able to distill the essence of the science enough to explain it to a public-health professional."

NYU's approach has attracted students whose expertise in legal, medical, and economic issues brings a level of sophistication to their studies.

Mary Louise Cohen, a first-year student, is a Harvard-educated lawyer who specializes in high-profile whistle-blower cases, many involving health care.

After one of her sons took her to Ethiopia, she began working through her law firm's foundation to support orphanages and clinics in the country. She reasoned that a degree in global public health would help ensure that the money she is helping distribute gets to the right people.

"If I'm going to be giving money away, I want to do it in a way that makes sense," she said.

On her three-hour train ride from Washington to New York for four days of classes each week, she pores over books on topics like the Ethiopian brain drain and the relative infection rates in hospitals.

**Effective Use of Money**

Ana Krieger, an assistant professor of medicine at NYU who directs the medical school's Sleep Disorders
Center, is a second-year student in the program. Like Ms. Cohen, she wants to learn how to make sure that money for health care is spent more efficiently and strategically.

"We understand many problems from a health-care perspective, but we need to step back and see how they relate to the economy and the social structure of a country," she said.

In addition to an internship in the United States or abroad that focuses on world health issues, NYU students participate in a yearlong capstone project their second year. Dr. Krieger and her teammates are studying urban violence in adolescent males in her native Brazil.

"It doesn't matter how successful we are at preventing disease through vaccinations if someone is going to die at age 12 of a gunshot," she said. Armed with a global public-health degree, she said, "I'll be able to take on these issues with a more holistic approach."