

# School of Public Health Confronts Today's Urgent Challenges

By Debra Bradley Ruder

Complex public health issues — from climate change to race, from mental health to addiction — require multiple perspectives, and Brown's collaborative culture provides a superb environment for developing solutions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a devastating toll on elderly populations and communities of color and magnified many longstanding disparities in health and wealth in this country.

The Brown University School of Public Health, driven by its vision to address urgent health challenges and improve health equity, is poised to make a difference in America's response to this and other public health challenges through its teaching, research and advocacy. The school's new dean, Dr. Ashish K. Jha (*below left*), is working with Brown President Christina H. Paxson and other University leaders to place the young but already excellent school at the forefront of public health education.

Jha, an outspoken physician, educator, health policy researcher and global health advocate, who was faculty director of the Harvard Global Health Institute before assuming the deanship on Sept. 1, plans to increase that impact by harnessing the expertise of the School of Public Health, the Warren Alpert Medical School and the entire University.

The School of Public Health, which grew out of the Medical School and launched in 2013 on South Main Street, offers graduate degrees and two undergraduate concentrations. It ranks among the top 10 schools of public health for funding from the U.S. National Institutes of Health, and its research centers and institutes focus on such key areas as addiction, aging, environmental health, global health, HIV/AIDS and mindfulness. Jha looks forward to connecting the dots between school and University experts in such fields as development economics, data analytics and computer science, public policy, and the humanities — and to encouraging Brown scholars to explore how they might apply their knowledge to public health. This includes considering critical issues around the role of race in public health.

As an example of its commitment to challenging systemic racism, the school in June announced the Health Equity Scholars program with Tougaloo College, a historically Black institution in Mississippi. Starting this fall, it will enroll up to five Tougaloo students or graduates in Brown's master of public health program, providing full tuition, enhanced mentoring and internships. The initiative builds on the University's

partnership with Tougaloo that has enabled student and faculty exchanges since the 1960s.

"The Health Equity Scholars program will help us train the next generation of public health leaders to address racism as a public health problem," says outgoing Dean Bess H. Marcus, who is returning to full-time research and teaching. "It is one of many ways the school has, and will continue to have, an impact on promoting the health and well-being of vulnerable populations."

## Understanding COVID-19

Shortly after SARS-CoV-2, the novel coronavirus that leads to COVID-19 disease, emerged on the global scene, University investigators began exploring ways to understand, treat and curb its spread. The University created a seed fund to fast-track innovative research that might offer local and global benefits. Among the 15 projects funded this past spring was a study led by School of Public Health Associate Professor Rosa Baier '04 MPH to gauge how nursing home and other long-term care staff around the country responded to COVID-19.

COVID-19 will transform everything from social norms such as handshaking to the way health care is delivered, with closed hospitals and much more virtual care (telehealth), Jha says. He envisions the School of Public Health playing a leading role in guiding that transformation toward a more equitable and effective healthcare system.

"The virus wasn't preventable, but our response — and the number of deaths and the economic calamity — were all preventable," Jha says. He urges a national strategy to test for COVID-19 in hospitals, schools, prisons and other high-risk places, as well as global cooperation to brace for future pandemics.

Given that COVID-19 has raised awareness of public health practices, Jha expects enrollments in public health courses and programs will grow. In fact, the school has seen a 71% increase in applications between 2019 and 2020. ■

## What is Public Health?



Mask wearing. Hand washing. Contact tracing. Social distancing. The COVID-19 pandemic has turned these basic public health concepts into household terms and piqued interest in studying the field.

Unlike clinical medicine, which focuses on the individual, public health aims to protect and improve the health of populations and communities. It addresses such challenges as infectious diseases, gun violence, substance use, mental illness, pollution and systemic racism. And it does so by bringing together experts from many different disciplines. Recent studies by Brown public health investigators have, for example:

- strengthened the link between air pollution exposure and cognitive decline by finding that air pollution, particularly nitrogen dioxide, may be associated with memory loss, cognitive deficits and faster cognitive decline among older adults;
- explored whether resilience-building factors such as optimism, spirituality and social support may help improve outcomes among Black Americans living with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS; and
- shown that mindfulness training helped lower blood pressure in participants with hypertension by helping them focus, control their emotions and understand their healthy and unhealthy habits.

"There's an old saying," says School of Public Health Dean Ashish K. Jha, "that when public health works, you don't notice it. You drink tap water and you don't get sick. You breathe the air outside and you don't get sick. You eat food at a restaurant and you don't immediately get sick. That's public health working."



"Our goal is to make the School of Public Health a national powerhouse that brings about important public health changes," Jha said this spring, as the U.S. faced the worst pandemic in a century (and one disproportionately affecting historically disadvantaged populations), a suffering economy and widespread civil unrest around anti-Black racism. "We need science and evidence at a perilous moment like this. The school is already playing an important role in the national

and international conversation on pandemic response. But we've also been thinking about how we can increase our impact."

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