

Improving Healthcare Through Social Justice

CENTER TACKLES IMPACT OF POVERTY, UNEMPLOYMENT, SOCIAL ISOLATION ON HEALTH

Individuals at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum are at higher risk for many diseases and health problems. This is a reality Dr. John Rich, Chair of the Health, Management, and Policy Department, hopes to tackle by developing leaders in healthcare management.

“Graduates of our program have the opportunity to influence the evolution of our healthcare system and develop the values that guide public health,” says Dr. Rich. “They are positively impacting society as hospital administrators, in consulting firms or the insurance world, and by doing research. They are accomplishing everything from helping people manage their diseases to building public health infrastructure where it doesn’t exist.”

Dr. Rich plays an integral role in two centers at Drexel that help cultivate this talent and prepare professionals for the world of healthcare.

Early Adversity Affects Later Health

Trained as a primary care physician, Dr. Rich has spent a great deal of time studying urban health issues among poorer populations, particularly young men who aren’t getting proper primary health care. With this knowledge and expertise, he launched The Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice (CNVSJ) at Drexel that studies the impact of trauma and violence on inner city residents, especially young men of color.

“We see young black males in lower income communities, ages 15-24, with higher rates of preventable diseases,” Dr. Rich says. “We want to know how we can fix this and improve the health of young men of color.”

A contributing factor is a life filled with stress and adversity that starts at a young age.

“Stress comes with the territory no matter what your station in life. We know that even among middle income, well-educated people, childhood ad-

versity predicts chronic diseases like heart disease and diabetes. When you are poor this effect is multiplied. Everything about poverty is a chronic stressor that affects a person’s health down the road,” says Dr. Rich.

There is often a direct correlation between adult health issues and childhood experiences. Traumas early in life can result in chronic stress and increased risk of health problems such as obesity, depression and heart disease.

At Drexel, CNVSJ is connecting research, education and practice to help create a society that protects people from trauma and adversity, and provides them with human rights and human dignity.

“To improve the health of adults, we need to improve the health of children,” says Dr. Rich. “We need to address the social determinant theory that things like poverty, unemployment, and social isolation play a role in people’s health.”

Trauma as a Public Health Issue

A primary theme at CNVSJ is trauma as a central problem in public health. “One of things we are studying is the impact of trauma and adversity and their impact on health across a lifespan,” says Dr. Rich.

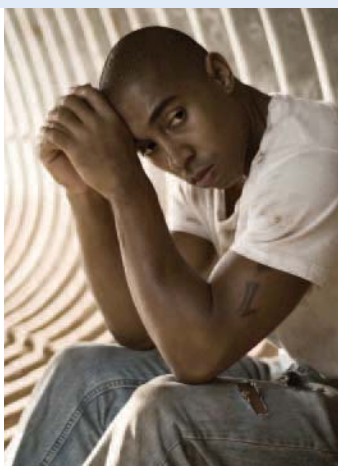
The Center aims to produce knowledge and practices that can address the relationship between trauma, adversity, violence and health in communities in an effort to decrease violence.

“We would like to achieve nonviolence, and social justice is a part of nonviolence because poverty itself hurts people,” says Dr. Rich.

Healing from a Trauma-Informed Perspective

One needs to look at the causes of injury to understand what often happens in the aftermath. According to Dr. Rich, many of the injured come from communities where racial profiling is a reality, guns are prevalent and people are often victims of violence for no reason at all. This sometimes leads to judgments of character by healthcare providers that traumatize patients and can lead to re-injury.

When people go to the emergency room with an





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acute trauma, we have an opportunity to intervene to interrupt the cycle of violence. “We want to change the language of violence from moral deficiency to a true understanding that people who are injured need healing, despite the circumstances,” says Dr. Rich.

“We need to see these folks as victims who have been traumatized, and that will lead to better all-around care,” adds Dr. Rich. “Our Center trains professionals to heal hurt people, and connect them to services that will reduce re-injury, such as substance abuse treatment, food services and other types of social services.”

The Center provides the training to help future professionals in the medical field understand these concepts. “When a professional understands trauma, he or she may treat a patient differently, or treat that person’s parents differently,” adds Dr. Rich.

When people are better trained to handle these situations and understand the effect the trauma is having on a person, the provider will give better care by not recreating the trauma, therefore helping ensure it doesn’t happen again. “No matter the

circumstances, rape victims and shooting victims should never be ‘blamed’ for what happened while receiving treatment. Understanding this will improve quality of care and help break this cycle of violence,” concludes Dr. Rich.



Before joining the Drexel School of Public Health, **Dr. John Rich** was Medical Director for the Boston Public Health Commission, the health department for the City of Boston. In that capacity, he oversaw the clinical functions of the Commission and developed initiatives to address emerging health problems.

Dr. Rich was also an Associate Professor of Medicine and Public Health at Boston University, and served as an attending physician at Boston Medical Center.

In 2006, Dr. Rich received a MacArthur Fellowship for his work to help address the epidemic of urban violence.

Dr. Rich is the author of a new book, *Wrong Place, Wrong Time: Trauma and Violence in the Lives of Young Black Men*, which will be published by Johns Hopkins University Press in fall 2009.