The Collaborative Center for Health Equity: A strategic priority at the UW School of Medicine and Public Health

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In 2005, the University of Wisconsin (UW) Medical School became the UW School of Medicine and Public Health, signaling a commitment to develop a new model that unites public health and medicine. Our vision of an outstanding education, research, and community engagement enterprise relies on the integration of biomedical sciences, care of individual patients, and the health of diverse communities across our state. Achieving our vision requires that our strategic priorities address minority health issues, disparities in health and health outcomes, and health equity across Wisconsin.

To ensure the continued success of our health equity mission, we created the Collaborative Center for Health Equity (CCHE) in 2009 and located it within the UW Institute for Clinical and Translational Research (ICTR).

Recently, we successfully applied for a new $7 million National Institutes of Health (NIH) Center of Excellence award from the National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities. Our application afforded us an opportunity to identify a number of new initiatives and an overall focus for the CCHE. The CCHE’s mission will be to build lasting partnerships with community organizations in collaborative teaching, research, and service initiatives, as we work together to improve health equity in Wisconsin’s underserved communities.

The CCHE connects partners from the state’s rural, urban, and tribal communities with university faculty, research staff, and students in long-term, mutually beneficial research partnerships. The CCHE is engaged with a growing number of communities committed to conducting research and/or leading projects targeting health equity issues. Partnerships are currently in place with the Urban Indian Wellness Consortium, the United Community Center, the House of Peace Community Center, the Center for Urban Population Health (all in Milwaukee), the Menominee Nation, the Oneida Nation, the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, the Lac de Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, and the Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council (GLITC). We also are developing a growing collaboration with the Center for Minority Health (CMH) at the University of Pittsburgh.

With this solid foundation in place, we are able to move quickly to implement new programs to advance our mission. Following are some examples:

- We are implementing 2 community-engaged research projects. One, undertaken with the GLITC, evaluates vitamin D supplementation to reduce cardiovascular disease in American Indian women. The other, in collaboration with several partners based in Dane County and Milwaukee, examines how individuals make decisions about participating in biomarker research.

- We are establishing 1 “research ambassador” position in Milwaukee as part of our expanding infrastructure support for UW-Madison investigators and trainees to conduct research across a broad spectrum addressing health disparities.

- Our collaboration with CMH at the University of Pittsburgh ensures that we will benefit from their decade and a half of experience in building greater capacity for community-academic partnerships addressing minority health and wellness and health equity. As part of this collaboration, the CCHE will also

Ms Esmond, the Collaborative Center for Health Equity (CCHE) administrative director, provides administrative oversight and project management to the center’s community-academic partnerships, collaborations and initiatives. Dr Adams, an associate professor of family medicine at the UW School of Medicine and Public Health, is director of the CCHE. Christine Sorkness, senior associate director of the Institute for Clinical and Translational Research, is the CCHE associate director. Dr Golden, the Robert Turell Professor in Medical Leadership, is the dean of the UW School of Medicine and Public Health and the vice chancellor for medical affairs at UW-Madison.
assist CMH with identifying Milwaukee-based organizations that could serve as pilot demonstration sites for a community engagement curriculum planned for the coming year.

- Damon Williams, PhD, UW-Madison vice chancellor for diversity and climate, has agreed to serve on the CCHE advisory board and is lending significant campus support and guidance in planning for the CCHE’s week-long Institute on Health Disparities Research Methodology to be offered in summer 2010.

- The CCHE assisted 2 partners, the Urban Indian Wellness Consortium and the House of Peace Community Center, with successful applications to the Healthy Wisconsin Leadership Institute’s Community Teams Program this year. This 12-month training opportunity facilitates the development of collaborative leadership and public health skills among teams of individuals who are mobilizing communities to identify and solve health problems. Representatives of each organization are participating in the program and helping define a community public health initiative to implement in the near future. Additionally, 2 ICTR/CCHE academic partners—Lisa Tiger, PhD, and Shannon Sparks, PhD—are serving as academic partners on these community teams, reflecting the CCHE’s commitment to the continued professional development of UW-Madison staff and faculty.

- The CCHE, in collaboration with ICTR’s Community Health Connections office and multiple Milwaukee-area community and academic organizations, sponsored a day-long forum in November to highlight community-academic research partnerships focused on health disparities among the city’s African American, Hispanic, Hmong, and Native American populations. More than 100 participants attended “Making Connections to Make a Difference.”

These projects exemplify the spectrum of our efforts across multiple cores of programming in education/training, research, and community engagement. It is just the beginning. With a seasoned staff, extensive support from ICTR, and a clear set of objectives, we hope to make a major impact on the health of diverse communities across our state.
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