

## Public Health Beat CONTINUES VIRAL SPREAD

By Ed Finkel (MSJ89)

Reporting cannot always satisfy a journalist's passion for public health—sometimes the storyteller must also become the subject.

Nafis Ahmed (BSCM05, MSJ09, MD09) took a break from medical school to pursue journalism at Medill, where he covered the health and science beat in the downtown newsroom. Last June, he earned his second and third degrees from Northwestern: one from the Feinberg School of Medicine and a master's from Medill.

Now he works as a resident in emergency medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, which has brought him into contact with public health topics, such as the H1N1 (swine flu) virus. Ahmed has started writing for *EM Resident*, a national association magazine for

residents specializing in the same field.

"Emergency medicine is sort of the front line when it comes to dealing with a lot of public health issues, especially with the swine flu epidemic," Ahmed says. "A lot of times we're dealing with seeing these patients for the first time, and also educating the public about what symptoms to look for, and how to treat it."

He hopes to continue writing while drawing upon his skills as a former broadcast student to create medical education videos, both for professionals and the public at large.

Preeti Malani (MSJ91), an assistant professor in geriatric medicine and infectious diseases at the University of Michigan, also serves as an associate editor of a journal titled *Infection Control and Hospital Epidemiology*.

Malani remembers an epiphany as an intern at the Dayton Daily Journal, when she covered a story about a plane crash victim whose family donated his organs. "I remember thinking, 'Maybe I want to be the one harvesting the organs—not writing about it,'" she says.

Still, her journalism background has helped in everything from editing the student section of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* as a medical student, to writing and editing her current journal. And even her core work as an infectious disease specialist brings her back to what she learned at Medill. "It's all thinking and asking questions. It's a lot like journalism," she says.

Lecturer Abigail Foerstner, who once covered science and the environment for the Chicago Tribune, teaches the graduate level health, science and environmental reporting class and says there's never a shortage of high-impact stories.

"We try to tell how the stories are going to impact people's lives, and tell those stories in multiple media—often with a lot of graphics and photographs," she says. "We are trying to give students the reporting tools they need to tell stories that are accessible, interesting and compelling in all media."

Foerstner says there are many outlets for this kind of work. "Every major magazine, every major Web site, usually has a health and science section," she adds. "These are some of the growing arenas where students are setting their sights."

Jim Distasio (MSJ04), editor in chief of Chicago-based Community Magazine Group, oversees a regionalized publication called *Community Health* that is distributed in five suburban and rural areas in the eastern half of the U.S.

About two-thirds of the content is national and one-third local, he says. For example, an edition in upstate New York focused on whooping cough, which has plagued that region more than others in recent years. The magazines also cover additions to hospitals, such as heart and cancer centers.

"Since health care is so large and fragmented, residents of midsized communities often don't realize what resources they have available to them," Distasio says. "It seems

that health care reporting is one of those still-lucrative fields for journalists. It's definitely steady, interesting work."

Government agencies, nonprofit organizations and health care institutions provide similar storytelling opportunities for IMC

program, the industry was evolving.

"Health care has changed dramatically in the past 20 years, more than almost any other time, because of the advent of managed care," Grassi says. "It became such an exciting time to do marketing."

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alumni or journalists who switch to public relations, Foerstner says. "Hospitals have stepped way beyond the kind of public relations brochures they used to do," she says. "Many of them have these glossy magazines with varied content, much more comprehensive than even a year ago."

Jasmine Sohaey Grassi (S88, MSA89) currently works at Magna Health Systems and has done health care marketing "since 1989 in any form that you can name." Having grown up in a family of doctors, Grassi was comfortable and familiar with the field of health care. When she completed what is now the IMC

Her closest involvement with public health occurred from 2002 to 2004 as director of alumni and community relations for the University of Iowa's College of Public Health. Grassi managed the communications and advertising for a series of outreach programs aimed at educating Iowans about public health issues and to communicating the college's commitment to address such concerns.

Like any good marketer or journalist, Grassi understood the importance of knowing the audience. In the post-Sept. 11 environment topics like bioterrorism—through such means as spreading smallpox or contaminating

the food supply—piqued people's interest, particularly in an agricultural state. And residents in western Iowa, populated by hog farms, were very receptive to hear about the university's research on concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFO).

"Small community colleges and rural communities did not always have access to Big Ten university researchers, unless we brought them out there, to people who wanted or needed information for their own better health," she says.

Alice Pollard (BSJ07) manages the HIV prevention education program at a nonprofit called the American Indian Health Service of Chicago. One of her main responsibilities is marketing community events through brochures, newsletter articles and a recently launched Web site ([www.nathiveamericanawareness.org](http://www.nathiveamericanawareness.org)).

She says that the Medill experience continues to help with her current job. "Everybody I talk to has a story. My journalism skills have helped in being able to talk to people and engage people, and ask a question in a way that gets people to tell their story." *EF*

*Ed Finkel (BSJ89) is an Evanston-based freelance writer who primarily covers community development, education and other public policy related issues.*

## Circle of Blue

With the worldwide demand for fresh water growing and planetary supplies becoming unpredictable, Circle of Blue ([www.circleofblue.org](http://www.circleofblue.org)) is covering the future of global water drop by drop.

The organization, founded in 2006 by J. Carl Ganter (MSJ91), bills itself as an international network of journalists, scientists and communications design experts that reports and presents information about the worldwide fresh water crisis.

It also is a nonprofit affiliate of the internationally recognized water, climate and policy think tank, The Pacific Institute.

Specifically, Circle of Blue publishes *WaterNews*, a daily dispatch of global water news and data, as well as independent multimedia projects for its Web site. Most of these pieces are funded by foundations, corporations and individuals.

Over the years reports have focused on fresh water problems in Australia, Mexico and India, as well as water issues here in the U.S. This past summer, Ganter and a number of journalists including intern Aaron Jaffe (BSJ12) returned from rural southwest China, where they researched a piece on how communities might rebound from pollution and other struggles related to poor water and land management.

"As journalists we've become good at covering celebrities and stories that are presented to us, but have trouble understanding slow-fuse issues of

a much bigger scale," Ganter says from his office in Traverse City, Mich. "The water story intersects everything we care about and we're relying on solid, persistent reporting to fill people in."

Ganter, 44, is no stranger to the power of the pen. During his graduate work at Medill in the 1990s, he worked under the tutelage of Professor David Prottess to find facts that overturned a stepfather's conviction in the 1990 murder of 7-year-old Jaclyn Dowalby in Midlothian, Ill. He has also worked as a photojournalist, writer and multimedia producer for *Time* and *Msnbc.com*.

Looking forward, Ganter says he and his staff of 12 will rely on data analysis and technology to expand Circle of Blue's coverage area into other aspects of global sustainability. In particular, he hopes to shine a skeptical light on the "green" industry and further investigate the intersection of energy, water and food.

"Just because something is deemed 'green' doesn't mean it's good for the environment," he says. "As journalists, we need to ask the simple questions that prompt our leaders to define policy and determine where we spend billions of dollars."

*Matt Villano (BSJ97) is a freelance writer and stay-at-home dad based in Healdsburg, Calif. Learn more about him at [www.villanthead.com](http://www.villanthead.com).*



Image courtesy Preeti Malani

Dr. Preeti Malani (MSJ91) serves as an associate editor of the journal, *Infection Control and Hospital Epidemiology*.