

Member Spotlight

Kristine M. Gebbie, DrPH,
RN
Interview by Megan Boelter

Dr. Kristine M. Gebbie, DrPH, RN, is the Elizabeth Standish Gill Associate Professor of Nursing, Director of the Center for Health Policy, and Director of the Doctor of Nursing Science Program at the Columbia University School of Nursing. A member of the Institute of Medicine since 1992, Dr. Gebbie has provided key leadership as Director of Washington and Oregon State Departments of Health; as the first White House National AIDS Policy Coordinator; as a Senior Consultant for Public Health Initiatives, US Department of Health and Human Services; and in many other positions.

Megan Boelter: Dr. Gebbie, what role has law played in your career?

The answer to this question is not as simple and straightforward as one would expect. The law accretes rather than exists as a tidy application. The role of law, in my career, has developed along with issues that arise over time. For example, once we start tinkering with a code, we realize that there are many echoes from other integral aspects of law and the provision of health services. We may make one adjustment in a certain section, but that adjustment may have major effects on another area and thereby

thereby must be consistent with existing standards governing public health agencies and officials.

As the Health Director for Washington, I worked with various individuals, including a colleague working for counsel in the state department of health. His experience as a local school board member gave him unexpected, yet invaluable, insight into the role of law in shaping policy with respect to education and health-related agendas. This kind of routine situation is not always thought of as a venue for the use of law, and yet it would be almost impossible to achieve certain outcomes were it not for the law as a resource and tool.

In your opinion, what are some of the most important uses of law to promote the public's health?

There are several, but the police powers of the state provide the framework and act as the definitive measures of the limits of what one can do personally as a citizen that may put other individuals and the public at risk. In this way, the law is used as a method of shaping one's behavior up front-before any potentially dangerous situation may arise. Although there may be only a relatively small number of people who may be likely to put others at risk, the law is a way of urging them to act in a more appropriate manner. The law provides structure.

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Questions and Answers

What is the Public Health Law Association?

PHLA is a non-profit, membership organization for everyone who shapes, uses, teaches, studies, or conducts research in the highly dynamic field of public health law.

Who should join PHLA?

If any law impacts your work to protect or improve the public's health, you should join PHLA. PHLA is a multidisciplinary peer-to-peer network of lawyers, public health practitioners, academicians, scientists, policy-makers, and others who believe that the law is a valuable public health tool.

When was PHLA created?

The PHLA was incorporated in June 2003 after a year's work by a group of public health practitioners brought together in Atlanta at CDC's annual Public Health Law Conference. With the addition of staff, PHLA continues to grow and provide new services.

What activities has PHLA conducted?

PHLA has hosted teleconferences on issues in the forefront of practice that give participants access to attorneys and public health practitioners. PHLA was a collaborating organization for CDC's Third Annual Partnership Conference on Public Health Law in June, 2004. Attended by over 500 conferees, PHLA members participated as conference faculty and hosted a reception and

awards ceremony honoring distinguished achievement in public health law. Additional products and services under development include a website, newsletter, conference sponsorships, and best practices publications.

How do I join PHLA?

Visit www.phla.info or contact membership@phla.info.

Calendar of Events

January 5-8, 2005
Annual Meeting
Association of American
Law Schools
San Francisco, CA

February 9-15, 2005
Midyear Meeting
American Bar Association
Salt Lake City, UT

February 23-25, 2005
Annual emerging issues meeting
ABA Health Law Section
Orlando, FL

April 5, 2005
TOPOFF3
Terrorism Preparedness Exercise
Connecticut, New Jersey
and London, UK

June 13-15, 2005
Fourth Annual Conference
"The Public's Health and the Law in the 21st Century"
Atlanta, GA

Sort of a pre-emptive method of enforcing community standards or rules?

Yes- as a way of doing so without impinging upon others. It encompasses many aspects of public health: regulating environmental impacts, regulation of businesses, and regulating individual behavior. It also overflows into the area of civil law as well...who is accountable for protecting the public and how do we make sure that such standards are upheld? Administrative laws provide details of individual pieces of legislation and other laws which either correspond or complement the public health code. They assist with interpretation of the legislative history, and help to define the limits of what we as public officials can do.

What sparked your initial decision to become a charter member of the Public Health Law Association?

I joined the Public Health Law Association because I knew that the membership would consist of ideal colleagues, and also because of the richness of thought that might spark interest among legal counterparts. I also see the Association as one that can foster real understanding of the legal basis for public health as a positive thing, thus increasing the overall effectiveness of public health.

As a member of PHLA, what areas or issues would you like to see the Association focus on in the near future?

Public health law is important in the process of teaching new public health officials about law and how to use law as tool, as opposed to viewing law as a hindrance. That really is what the development of public policy is: teaching the public about the importance of protecting health. The Institute of Medicine's recent report regarding public health preparedness, "Who Will Keep the Public Healthy?," identifies public health law coursework as one of the emerging and critical areas to include in a public

health or professional training curriculum. The Public Health Law Association can, and should, play a role in advancing this effort to ensure that the next generation of public health practitioners is literate in the basic tenets of public health law.

Megan Boelter is a third year JD/MPH student at St. Louis University's School of Law.

President's Column



Ask yourself how many laws impact your work in public health. Compulsory childhood immunizations, prohibiting sale of tobacco to minors, seat belt requirements, restaurant permits, HIPAA--you get the picture. PHLA needs you, whatever your discipline in public health, to join in the dialogue.

In this contentious election year, I assumed the leadership role in relatively painless fashion. I did not have to contend with straw polls, town halls, debates, morning show interviews, or jokes from the late-night comedians. I enjoyed the good fortune of being honored by my peers on the Board of Directors to lead PHLA through its second year.

We have a very hard-working and congenial Board of Directors. Membership on the Board was increased from nine to eleven members in order to better realize the interdisciplinary and international reach of PHLA. The Board now includes a member from Canada as well as a state representative, a local public health director, a law professor, and a former judge. PHLA is not just for lawyers!

The Board met in August to define the priorities for the year. The top priority was to hire an executive director. We are pleased to announce that Susan K. Steeg, former Secretary of PHLA and General Counsel of the Texas Department of Health, will serve as Interim Executive Director during this next year.

We have a full agenda for this year. We will continue to host teleconferences to address issues of importance. We will continue to develop the website to serve as a resource to public health practitioners. We will keep our members informed with a quarterly newsletter. We have plans to develop a best practices guide and to distribute white papers on relevant subjects.

Your presence at the APHA Annual Meeting shows your commitment to public health. Join PHLA and be a part of the only organization devoted to advancing the use and understanding of law to protect and improve the public's health.

With best regards,

Anne Murphy

PHLA Inaugural Year Awards

At the CDC's Third Annual "The Public's Health and the Law Conference" in June 2004, PHLA conducted its first annual awards ceremony. The 2004 Distinguished Achievement in Public Health Law Award was awarded to the Turning Point Collaborative. This award is given annually to an individual, organization, or group to acknowledge outstanding achievement in the development, use or application of law as a means to promote healthy people and healthy communities. Gene Matthews, Esq. was awarded the 2004 Distinguished Career Achievement Award for his outstanding record of service and leadership at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This award is the highest given as

merited to an individual whose career has been devoted to using, creating and encouraging the use of law to improve the public's health. Nominations will begin in Spring 2005 with awards presented at CDC's Fourth Annual "The Public's Health and the Law Conference".

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