Welcome to The READ (Research, Education, Achievements, and Diversity)! The Department of Population Health Sciences is excited to share stories and updates from our very own faculty, staff, and students. Let's get to know each other better and lift up our colleagues.

A Letter From the Editor

By Czarina Navos Behrends, PhD, MPH
Diversity and Inclusion Champion
Assistant Professor of Population Health Sciences

Welcome to the inaugural issue of The READ (Research, Education, Achievements, and Diversity)! We will use this space to celebrate the accomplishments of our students, faculty, and staff; share resources and knowledge; and get to know our colleagues better. As a department full of individuals with unique backgrounds and experiences, we’re excited to keep learning from one another and hearing more voices. We’re also looking forward to moving towards seeing everyone in person and making more connections face to face. This semester, we are launching the Diversity and Inclusion Coalition to foster diversity, inclusion, and belonging within our department. Representatives from faculty, students, and staff will have the opportunity to provide input on initiatives and share their ideas of how to make our community a better one. I welcome all of you to feel free to speak to me directly or share your ideas with your coalition representative on ways to improve diversity and create a better sense of belonging. We also encourage you to share any stories, awards, initiatives, or accomplishments about yourself, colleagues, or students for consideration in the newsletter. Let’s celebrate each other, forge connections, and foster equity and support in our department and our teams. Thank you for taking the time to learn more about your PHS colleagues!

Czarina Navos Behrends, PhD, MPH, serves as the diversity and inclusion champion for the Department of Population Health Sciences. She is also an assistant professor in the Division of Comparative Effectiveness & Outcomes Research. Her research interests include harm reduction strategies, program evaluation, and research relating to HIV and hepatitis C testing and care, with a special focus on people who inject drugs.

TEAM HIGHLIGHTS

We spoke with members from different teams to find out how they have handled working remotely.

- [Team A] has been working hard to adapt to the new environment.
- [Team B] has been successful in maintaining productivity.
- [Team C] has implemented new strategies to keep everyone connected.

Keep an eye out for more updates and stories from our team members!
We spoke with members from different teams to find out how they have handled working during the COVID-19 pandemic this past year and a half, how things have changed, and what they are looking forward to. Here are their thoughts.

**Administration**

The administrative team regularly interacts with people in all positions across the Department. From onboarding new employees to planning events, they are key to our shared success. Because of their widespread impact, making the transition to working from home was a stark difference in their daily personal connections.

Awista Hamid, administrative supervisor, ended weeks during the height of the pandemic on an uplifting note with team virtual happy hours. She and colleagues also used GIFs in Microsoft Teams to brighten the days, which was helpful to not only talk shop but to discuss world news or what was happening in their personal lives.

Maritza Montalvo, program specialist, was part of the team that helped make all Department events virtual. To her, it felt like a challenging and exciting new tag team effort. “Each member completing specific tasks in sequential order from start to finish in an organized fashion and staying connected online has been super helpful.” Figuring out how to adjust to a virtual workplace to keep the Department running smoothly has kept everyone engaged, inspired, and productive.

Berence Alvarez, administrative assistant, also reflected on the importance of professional relationships. During difficult days, her colleagues offered support and mental breaks. Although this no longer meant taking a coffee break together or catching up by the water cooler, a new routine formed. Informally checking on one another via online chats helped keep the ritual and nurture bonds even while not being physically together.

As COVID cases have declined in New York City, the administrative team can be found in the office more often. Their efforts in keeping the rest of the Department connected while some still work virtually cannot be understated. They are looking forward to interacting with new and veteran employees in person this academic year.

**Biostatistics**

The skills of biostatisticians became even more valuable at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic as they helped the healthcare community understand surges in cases, hospital needs, and more. Virtual support among colleagues has been an uplifting opportunity to stay connected and feel the importance of their work.

For Katherine Hoffman, MS, research biostatistician II, writing her blog, KHstats, to document the ongoing pandemic and create a lasting memory of feelings and events helped her process what was happening. While another digital platform, Slack, was often used to share statistics among colleagues, it also became a haven for conversations leading to moments of human connection during a global disaster.

Victoria Cooley, MS, research biostatistician II, agreed that using Slack to see what people were thinking and feeling was critical in maintaining their sense of community. Anjile An, MPH, research biostatistician II, helped start the biostatistics book club before the pandemic. This was something that kept morale up as the group transitioned to virtual meetings. To her, it was a nice way to keep in touch with coworkers and read books outside of people’s usual comfort zones. Over the summer, the group had a socially distanced book club meeting, which turned into a Central Park picnic.

The biostatistics team is cautiously optimistic about what the future holds and is excited to eventually return to working in person more often.
What We Can Predict And Cannot Predict About Our COVID-19 Future

By Jay Varma, MD
Director of the Cornell Center for Pandemic Preparedness and Response

When the first public reports of COVID-19 emerged in December 2019, I was based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, leading development of the first African continent-wide public health agency (Africa CDC). Recognizing the threat that a novel respiratory virus posed to low- and middle-income countries, our team rapidly mobilized funding and developed a strategic plan that was endorsed by all 55 African countries in February. A few months later, at the request of Mayor Bill de Blasio, I left Ethiopia to guide New York City’s response to COVID-19. Starting in April 2020, I developed a strategy that resulted in the largest community testing, tracing, and supportive services program for COVID-19 in the U.S. Looking back on the past two years, I feel comfortable making a few predictions about our COVID-19 future:

1. The end of the COVID-19 pandemic will be impossible to predict with certainty. The virus is still spreading across the country, and we cannot know how effective vaccines will be. We will need to continue to adapt to the virus, to make our way through the pandemic.

2. We will see a resurgence in COVID-19 cases as we start to resume normal activities. As restrictions are lifted, we will need to be prepared for outbreaks and the possibility that we may need to continue to respond to them.

3. We will see a surge in investment and research into two areas of infectious disease control that have long been under-researched: diagnosis and health protection. How can we develop more rapid, accurate, and accessible platforms for both diagnosis and sub-typing of pathogens? How can we improve individual health protection, such as masks, gowns, and gloves? How can we develop and implement standard, effective, and affordable approaches to decontaminate the air just as we do water and physical surfaces?

4. At all levels of government—local to global—we will see increasing attention and responsiveness to new epidemic threats. The range of investment and action, however, will vary greatly as different jurisdictions grapple with widely divergent public views about the importance of individual versus collective rights. In some places, health security will come to be seen as a critical function of government, just as physical safety is.

All of that said, for public health experts like myself, COVID-19 has had one unifying and enduring lesson: always be humble, especially when predicting the future.
few predictions about the future:

1. No forecast about COVID-19 infections will be accurate beyond a few weeks and, even then, should be considered with extreme caution. The standard paradigm of infectious diseases epidemiology requires us to consider host, pathogen, and environment when estimating transmission dynamics. But how do you accurately predict the future when too little is known about each of these changing factors, particularly human behavior?

2. Our inability to vaccinate all humans around the world, the presence of multiple animal reservoirs, and the rapidity of new variant emergence mean that we will be living with COVID-19 for years to come. At some point, it is likely that a variant will emerge to supplant Delta, one with an even greater ability to infect, evade immunity, and/or cause illness and death, making us confront, yet again, the harms and benefits of restricting individual

Jay Varma, MD, is an expert on the prevention and control of diseases, having led epidemic responses, developed global and national policies, and led large-scale programs that have saved hundreds of thousands of lives in China, Southeast Asia, Africa, and the United States. After graduating magna cum laude with highest honors from Harvard, Dr. Varma completed medical school, internal medicine residency, and chief residency at the University of California, San Diego School of Medicine. From 2001−2021, he worked on infectious diseases prevention and control for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention with postings in Atlanta, Thailand, China, Ethiopia, and New York City. In September 2021, Dr. Varma joined Weill Cornell Medicine’s Department of Population Health Sciences to conduct research, training, and programs on public health preparedness and response. Dr. Varma has authored 141 scientific manuscripts, six essays, and one book.

D AY I N T H E L I F E

The Department of Population Health Sciences is a collaborative research and evaluations hub comprising six divisions, two institutes, and six research programs. Our work has a far-reaching impact. Through data-driven applied research, technological innovation, and novel educational programs, we are improving the health of both the individual and the population at large.

One such example is All of Us - a consortium project to collect data from one million or more people living in the United States to accelerate research and improve health. By enrolling individuals of all backgrounds, researchers take into account the individual differences in lifestyle, environment, and biology that will ultimately lead to the development of precision medicine and treatment paths.

Curious about what goes on behind the scenes in this historic research effort? Wanda Tossas shares her story.

As a Puerto Rican woman, I know the history of medical trials in the U.S. and understand why there may be mistrust among certain populations. What I try to do is assure the participants and convey the fact that this initiative is really designed for us and our benefit.

Potential research participants are normally discovered via provider champions who advocate for the All of Us program. Call center staff make the first contact, followed by an online survey, and physical measurements and biospecimen collection in the clinics. When the city-wide shutdown occurred in March 2020, many non-essential programs were put on pause, including All of Us enrollment. However, Wanda and her team of call center staff and outreach workers continued to work with patients to ensure they had access to the program.

According to Wanda, this required creativity in how to reach and enroll participants. They worked on ways to enroll patients who were older or from different cultures who may have language barriers.

“People who are older often have a background or ethnicity that is similar to mine. They might have trouble with English andjust being able to speak to them in Spanish and explain the program is something I truly enjoy.”
Wanda Tossas  
Patient Research Coordinator

When Wanda Tossas was introduced to the All of Us program, it just made so much sense. Having worked in the healthcare field for many years before joining Weill Cornell Medicine, she witnessed firsthand the difficulties of matching patients to the right treatment plans. “The program is trying to individualize healthcare and it’s something I am truly passionate about,” she shared. “I was blown away when I learned about pharmacogenomics and how it can minimize side effects according to how different people metabolize active ingredients. It gives me a lot of hope for the future.”

Wanda joined All of Us in December 2018 as a customer service representative before transitioning to her current role as a patient research coordinator. Serving on the program’s frontlines, she plays a prominent role in building a connection with the program participants. “Being a part of a research initiative can be a bit scary for some people. As a Puerto Rican woman, I know the history of medical trials in the U.S. and understand why there may be mistrust among certain populations,” she related. “What I try to do is assure the participants and convey the fact that this initiative is really designed for us and our benefit. Sometimes I get to speak to someone colleagues continued to engage with existing participants through the COVID-19 Participant Experience (COPE) survey, an effort designed to learn about the changes in participants’ daily life, health, and well-being over the course of the pandemic. “Being stuck at home, it was nice to be able to reach out to people over the phone and have these personal conversations about their health,” she shared. “As COVID-19 cases began to decline, people were more willing to hear about what they can do to inform on the current and future pandemic responses.” Since its launch in May 2020, initial COPE surveys have allowed researchers to access mental health data from more than 63,000 participants on the topics of stress, social distancing, work changes, and more.

The work culture within All of Us is also a core component of Wanda’s day-to-day. With 22 team members, the program boasts one of the department’s largest and most diverse teams. Staff backgrounds range from medical school to anthropology to psychology. “Since the pandemic started, I’ve become so much closer to my colleagues,” she said, emphasizing the unique advantages of an online environment that allows people to break down barriers and become less shy. “We talk every day and help each other with any trouble we come across.” The team also has an engagement committee responsible for planning remote activities boosting staff morale, such as all-day retreats and happy hours. “They work so hard keeping our team engaged.”

As Wanda completes her final semester at City College for her bachelor’s degree in sociology, she is already exploring graduate programs in public health. “All of Us showed me that I don’t have to be clinical personnel to make an impact on healthcare. I’m inspired.”

STUDENT SPOTLIGHTS
MS in Healthcare Policy and Research
Fariha Mujeebuddin, ’21
After completing her undergraduate degree in global public health and economics amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Fariha Mujeebuddin felt compelled to continue her work and education in this field. A 2021 graduate of the health policy and economics track, Fariha will begin a new role as a health policy research analyst at a policy and research firm based in Washington, DC. Read more of her story here.

Maria (Pura) Purificacion Ballester-Navarro, ’21
Growing up with a brother with autism spectrum disorder and an associated intellectual disability, Maria (Pura) Purificacion Ballester-Navarro is passionate about exploring research to help this population. A 2021 graduate of the health informatics track, she is motivated to research autism spectrum disorders and drug-drug interactions. Read more of her story here.

Zizhuo Xu, ’21
Zizhuo Xu has seen the power of data science in medicine during the COVID-19 pandemic. A 2021 graduate of the biostatistics and data science track, he is motivated to use his skills to bring health knowledge to those around him. Now, Zizhuo is set to begin his doctoral studies in data science and analysis at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. Read more of his story here.

MEET OUR NEW CAO

Introducing ... Anny Fernández, MS

Anny Fernández, MS, recently joined us as the chief administrative officer of the Department of Population Health Sciences. The native New Yorker with more than 30 years of experience had this to say about her new role:

"I decided to take on this position primarily because of the research. The faculty and staff that I have met seem very genuine to me, and that's important. It feels like I can provide a lot of my services across many different areas, not only with finances, but with operations and organizational development. I'm hoping to really get to know what the different divisions do and find out what services I can provide as the new CAO. I believe in servant leadership. So, to me, it is about serving the research community."

NEW HIRES
May 1 – October 4, 2021
Help us celebrate the accomplishments of our PHS colleagues.

**Natalie Benda, PhD**, received a K99/R00 award from the National Institute on Minority and Health Disparities for "Maternal Outcome Monitoring and Support (MOMS) - A mHealth symptom self-monitoring and decision support system to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in postpartum outcomes."

**Ruth Masterson Creber, PhD**, was awarded an R21 from the National Institute of Child Health & Human Development for "mHealth and Mobile Ultrasound for Mothers in Myanmar (mMUMM)." She also received an R01 from the National Institute of Neurological Disorders & Stroke for "Randomized Comparison of the Clinical Outcome of Single Versus Multiple Arterial Grafts: Cognition (ROMA:Cog)." She was recently elected into FAAN (Fellowship of the American Academy of Nursing) and inducted on October 9. This November, Dr. Masterson Creber will receive the Mathey Mazey Excellence in Aging Research Award at the American Heart Association Scientific Sessions.

**Ali Jalali, PhD, MA**, received the Addiction Health Services Research Conference Early Career Investigator Award.

**Hye-Young (Arian) Jung, PhD**, received an R01 from the National Institute on Aging for "Higher Primary Care Reimbursements and the Quality of Care for Dually-Eligible Patients with Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementias in Skilled Nursing Facilities."

**Jialin Mao, MD, MS**, was awarded a K01 from the National Heart, Lung, & Blood Institute for "Leveraging Linked Registry and Electronic Health Records to Examine Long-Term Patient Outcomes After Peripheral Vascular Intervention."
Jyotishman Pathak, PhD, was awarded an R41 from the National Institute of Mental Health for "Risk Modeling and Shared Decision Making for Postpartum Depression."

Bruce Schackman, PhD, MBA, was selected by the Society for Medical Decision Making's Board as the named honoree for the Lee B. Lusted Category Award in Health Services, Outcomes and Policy Research.

William Schpero, PhD, received the Dean's Diversity and Healthcare Disparity Research Award for "Association Between State Medicaid Policies and Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Cancer Clinical Trial Enrollment."

Elizabeth Sweeney, PhD, ScM, who has been researching multiple sclerosis for close to a decade, received the Biostatistics/Informatics Junior Faculty Award from the National Multiple Sclerosis Society.

Rulla Tamimi, ScD, MS, was named a Komen Scholar and awarded $400,000 for her research. She will use patient samples and breast cancer outcome data from the Nurse's Health Study and ongoing dietary intervention studies to better understand the impact insulin-suppressing diets have on breast cancer risk, response to treatment and overall survival.

Fei Wang, PhD, received an RF1 from the National Institute on Aging for "Identification of Mild Cognitive Impairment Using Machine Learning from Language and Behavior Markers."

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**RESOURCES**

**PHS Events Calendar**
Stay in the know about upcoming seminars, grand rounds, town halls, lectures, and other special events

[www.phs.wellcornell.edu/events](http://www.phs.wellcornell.edu/events)

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**Employee Resources Portal**
Information for faculty, staff, postdocs, and new hires
Access resources for diversity and inclusion, wellness, branding, and more

[www.phs.wellcornell.edu/employee-resources](http://www.phs.wellcornell.edu/employee-resources)

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**WCM Employee Intranet**
Learn about services and policies, enroll in benefits, mark your calendar for events, and get any needed professional assistance

[hr.well.cornell.edu](http://hr.well.cornell.edu)

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**WCM COVID-19 Updates**
Find information about daily attestations, health and safety policies, travel policies, vaccination resources, mental health and wellbeing, and more

[wcmcentral.well.cornell.edu/covid19](http://wcmcentral.well.cornell.edu/covid19)
In celebration of Pride Month, Bruce Schackman, PhD, MBA, reflected on how his relationships and activism have shaped his career. Read his inspiring story.