

HISTORY OF THE YALE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

The Yale School of Public Health is one of the oldest nationally accredited schools of public health in the country. It was one of the eight existing schools first accredited by the American Public Health Association in 1946, though its origins date back three decades earlier as a department in the Yale School of Medicine.

In 1914 Yale University received an endowment from the Anna M. R. Lauder family to establish a chair in public health in the School of Medicine. This chair was filled in 1915 by Charles-Edward Amory Winslow, who was to be a central figure in the development of public health at Yale for thirty years. In 1920 Winslow set forth a definition of public health:

Public health is the science and the art of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting physical health and efficiency through organized community efforts for the sanitation of the environment, the control of community infections, the education of the individual in principles and personal hygiene, the organization of medical and nursing services for the early diagnosis and preventive treatment of disease, and the development of the social machinery which will ensure to every individual a standard of living adequate for the maintenance of health; organizing these benefits in such a fashion as to enable every citizen to realize his birthright of health and longevity.

In the early 1920s, Winslow's Department of Public Health at Yale was a catalyst for public health reform in Connecticut, and his health surveys—prepared in collaboration with other members of the faculty and students—led to considerable improvements in public health organization across the country. He also successfully campaigned to improve health laws in Connecticut and for the passage of a bill that created the State Department of Public Health.

Winslow focused on “the education of undergraduate medical students along the lines of preventive medicine.” He also established a one-year program leading to a Certificate in Public Health, which later became the Master of Public Health degree. From the beginning, Winslow sought to build bridges between the Department of Public Health, the Sheffield Scientific School, and the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences by making courses available to students in the other schools. He was also able to establish Bacteriology, Pathology, and Public Health as a single, unified department in the graduate school.

Winslow looked to a number of existing departments (Bacteriology, Immunology, Medicine, Pathology, Pediatrics, Physiological Chemistry, Sanitary Engineering, and Zoology) to supplement his own courses in public health principles, public health administration, and vital statistics. He established a comprehensive nonmedical program that by 1925 graduated eighteen students with a Certificate in Public Health, ten with a Ph.D., and four with a Dr.P.H. Students specialized in administration, bacteriology, or statistics.

During Winslow's thirty years at Yale, hygiene developed into preventive medicine; bacteriology evolved into microbiology to include parasitology and virology; classic epidemiology evolved into clinical epidemiology; control of communicable diseases became chronic disease control; and public health assimilated the social dimensions of sickness and health and appropriated such disciplines as medical economics and medical care organization. It was due to Winslow's innovative foresight and commitment to interdisciplinary education that the department's academic programs earned recognition as a nationally accredited School of Public Health in 1946.

In the early 1960s, the Yale Department of Public Health merged with the Section of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine, a unit within the Department of Internal Medicine. In 1964 the new department moved into its own building, the Laboratory of Epidemiology and Public Health (LEPH), which was designed by Philip Johnson and continues as its primary location for research and teaching.

Concurrent with the move into LEPH, the Rockefeller Foundation bequeathed its arbovirus research unit, including its scientists and research staff, to Yale. The arrival of virologists Wilbur Downs, Nobel Prize winner Max Theiler, Jordi Casals, Sonja Buckley, and others began a rapid expansion of public health at Yale. Their groundbreaking work on tropical diseases set the stage for a division of international health that focused on basic health care and delivery in underserved populations.

Meanwhile, as public health successes in infectious disease control (polio, measles, etc.) were changing medical demands nationally, the school also broadened its focus to address the growing burden of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, and issues surrounding aging. During these years, the Master of Public Health curriculum was also reorganized into four divisions (biostatistics, epidemiology, hospital administration, and environmental health).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, health policy and the psychosocial and behavioral determinants of health gained focus as academic specialties. Today, faculty and students also bring expertise in genomics, mathematical modeling, behavioral economics, and innovative technologies to the field, the bench, and the classroom to address evolving public health challenges and advance health promotion in the era of globalization.

In February 2022, Yale University announced that the Yale School of Public Health would be transformed into an independent, self-supporting professional school, effective July 1, 2024.

More than a century after Winslow's appointment, Public Health continues to strengthen its interdisciplinary research partnerships with numerous entities at the School of Medicine and across Yale's campus. The school honors Winslow's commitment to public health education across disciplines and community practice through an array of degrees offered to a wide audience, ranging from undergraduates to advanced professionals, in conjunction with Yale College, the graduate school, and several of Yale's professional schools.