

B. Health Politics and Policies: Paradoxes and Practices at Home and Abroad

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Tuesdays, 1:00 - 2:30 p.m. Norris University Center

This course introduces pressing healthcare problems worldwide and efforts underway to address them. The United States is a key player in addressing health challenges in low-income countries, but paradoxically, has one of the most problematic healthcare systems among high-income countries. We explore historical, environmental, political, social and economic factors shaping experiences of illness and healthcare delivery across societies. Focus will be on health policy and healthcare systems. Each session ends with a coda: given imperfect systems, what are some lessons we can glean to help ourselves and society as a whole?

Sep. 24 A Brief Introduction to Global Health

Global health, formerly known as International Public Health, refers to the ways that researchers, donors, and policy makers attempt to use funding, research, and interventions to address some of the world's most pressing health issues. This session defines global health, key policies, and programs meant to address health challenges abroad, and highlights unintended consequences of existing programs.

Oct. 1 Why Poverty Persists

Low-income countries have received financial support since the 1960s, with aid levels substantially increasing. Why then aren't these countries doing substantially better? This session examines the history of development, loan, and aid interventions, what these have done in practice, and why these interventions haven't always produced the outcomes they aim for.

Oct. 8 How Health Statistics Lie

Since the 1990s, there has been a push towards more "evidence based" interventions in medicine and healthcare. This session pulls back the curtain to reveal the realities of how health statistics are produced, why they are often unreliable and inaccurate, and the implications of using poor-quality data to make important health decisions at home and abroad.

Oct. 15 How Did We Get Here? Politics & Debates about US Healthcare

While not everyone is aware of why healthcare is so expensive in the USA, anyone who has had to pay for healthcare service, whether insured or uninsured, is aware that it's expensive and extremely difficult for people to navigate to get the care they need. This session provides a background on debates and major policy shifts in US healthcare, including the adoption of Medicaid and Medicare and the Affordable Care Act. Ultimately, the session provides an explanation for why the US healthcare system remains one of the most expensive and least efficient health systems among comparable high-income countries, and targets which issues need to be addressed to improve.

Oct. 22 Conundrums of Health Systems in Developing Countries

Maternal mortality rates are a gauge of the overall quality of health systems. This session explores interventions that can reduce maternal mortality rates and improve overall healthcare in low-income countries, drawing on research in Tanzania as a case study. Well-intentioned interventions misunderstand the contexts in which healthcare delivery happens, often undermining its efficacy and unintentionally wasting precious resources.

Oct. 29 Conundrums of Maternity Care in the United States

Unbeknownst to many, the United States has the highest maternal mortality rate of all comparable high-income countries, even though the US spends more money per capita on healthcare than any other country in the world. What is so different about how the USA approaches maternal health care compared to other high-income countries, and what do these differences mean in terms of outcomes? Ultimately, what are policy shifts that could address this pressing issue?

Nov. 5 NO CLASS Election Day

Nov. 12 Mosquito-borne Diseases

The world's deadliest animal is the mosquito, a carrier of a variety of parasites and viruses. Climate change has turned places that did not previously struggle with mosquito-borne diseases into mosquito breeding grounds. This session covers how public health interventions have attempted to keep people safe from these diseases, and the results of these efforts, helping us understand why these interventions can sometimes have mixed results.

Nov. 19 HIV/AIDS at Home and Abroad

The global HIV/AIDS pandemic hit public awareness in the 1980s, and by the 1990s was the #1 killer of men in the USA aged 25-44. Yet nowhere did this pandemic devastate more than in sub-Saharan Africa, and it remains a substantial challenge to combat and treat both in the USA and abroad. This session covers what the US government has done to combat this challenging retroviral disease at home and abroad, revealing some of the politics behind why efforts to contain the disease have been more successful abroad than they have been in the USA.

Nov. 26 How (not) to Save the World

Food drives for the local food pantry, buying memorabilia to fund breast cancer research, volunteering in low-income countries to build libraries or provide health care—from early in childhood through our adult lives, we’re taught that we should be doing things to help the less fortunate as we are able. This session highlights unintended consequences of good intentions with a deep dive into volunteering in health facilities abroad. Ultimately, the session concludes with best practices for ensuring our good intentions actually become good works.

Professor Noelle Sullivan is a medical and sociocultural anthropologist. She has researched global health sectors since 2005 and has been part of Northwestern’s Program of Global Health Studies since 2012. She was named Charles Deering McCormick Distinguished Lecturer in 2018 and has held various fellowships, including at the Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities and the Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching. Based on extensive research, Sullivan’s forthcoming book, ***The Business of Good Intentions***, critiques international voluntourism in under-resourced health sectors.