

# Lindheim Award Winner Bridges Health and City Planning



Heather Kuiper, recipient of the Lindheim Award

If walking and biking improve health, why aren't there more safe sidewalks and bike lanes? If limiting our use of cars reduces air pollution and asthma, why are our schools on the outskirts of town and grocery stores outside of our neighborhoods? Why don't more transit lines link our homes and work? How do we convince decision makers to create built environments that better support health?

Dr.P.H. candidate **Heather Kuiper** has won the Roselyn Lindheim Award in Environmental Design and Public Health for a research project that seeks to understand the role of local health departments in both posing such questions and finding answers.

The award, honoring late UC Berkeley architecture professor **Roselyn Lindheim**, supports graduate students whose work reflects and furthers Lindheim's innovative, interdisciplinary approach to creating healthier and more humane environments.

Kuiper, a 20-year veteran of national and international public health, also strives to bridge disciplines. She is working to infuse health considerations into city and regional planning.

## COMBATING CHRONIC DISEASE

Theoretically, policies and regulations governing such things as zoning, water quality, and roadways are meant to safeguard public health and welfare under the assumption that compliance will ensure a healthy living environment. Kuiper, however, cites a growing body of evidence to the contrary: "Many chronic disease conditions influenced by the built environment have reached epidemic proportions, including obesity, heart disease, diabetes, asthma, depression, and stress."

Inasmuch as the built environment—the environment where people live, work, learn, and play—can better support people's health, Kuiper believes shifting approaches are needed to address the upswing of chronic disease. Additionally, she notes that merely realigning public health and city planning (which historically worked in greater concert) is not enough: "Some strategies intended to resolve earlier health challenges may actually underlie problems now. For example, single-use zoning, decentralized urban form, and discharge-based sanitation systems designed to reduce disease also contribute to climate change, water and air contamination, eutrophication, car dependency, attenuated social networks, nature deficits, and endocrine disruption."

Instead, she intends that this study develop recommendations for a "wiser reunion," one informed by ecological sustainability and regeneration, to offer long-term health promotion. "We don't want the solutions of today to be the problems of tomorrow," cautions Kuiper. "This time around we need to do better. Solutions should address what happens if we multiply times 100 thousand neighborhoods, what happens if we multiply by 100 years."

Her current work suggests that engaging health departments in shaping the built environment can be an effective strategy for improving the public's health. "Local health departments are well-situated to shape the built environment," she asserts. "Their regulatory charge, their functions in epidemiology, policy, service, and community outreach, and their proximity to the local level can be assets in this process."

**Dan Lindheim**, son of the late professor and a member of the award selection committee, says, "Kuiper is trying to see how people with health expertise in government can have more impact. She is trying to link health, physical plant, land use, and environment—all subjects close to my mother's vision." In doing this, Kuiper is bringing together people from different backgrounds and giving voice to those who have not traditionally had a seat at the development table. Dan Lindheim appreciates that she is working in the field with real people: "My mother believed in solving real problems in the real world."

## OVERCOMING BARRIERS

So what is preventing local public health departments from addressing the built environment? Kuiper's study has already established that 92 percent of California's health departments are aware of evidence that the built environment affects health, yet only 42 percent reported actually working in some capacity in the area of land use and transportation. "You ask someone if they value clean air and clean water, if they value their health, and they almost always say yes," says Kuiper. "This research should help health and planning overcome myriad barriers to better align practice with societal values."

In later phases of the study, Kuiper will assess how the state's health departments are participating in built environment planning and develop case studies of what has worked and what hasn't. In keeping with Lindheim's commitment to conducting accessible research, Kuiper will share her findings with health departments, solicit their input, and make her research available in forms useful to those in practice and policy.

Kuiper remains optimistic and connected to the idea that her work will help health departments even beyond California. "California is one of the largest economies in the world. What happens here affects the country and the world," says Kuiper of what her research can mean globally. "My hope is that there are many story lines here in California that others will be able to draw from." 🌱

—Johanna Van Hise Heart