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Recognizing Excellence in Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Epidemiology: The National MCH Epidemiology Awards

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Abstract

Purpose—Professionals in the field of maternal and child health (MCH) epidemiology are publicly recognized by the Coalition for Excellence in MCH Epidemiology representing 16 national MCH agencies and organizations.

Description—During the CityMatCH Leadership and MCH Epidemiology Conference, the national awards are presented to public health professionals for improving the health of women, children, and families. The awards have evolved over the last two decades with focus on awardees that represent more types of MCH public health professionals.

Assessment—Since 2000, the Coalition has presented 111 national awards in the areas of advancing knowledge, effective practice, outstanding leadership, excellence in teaching and mentoring, early career professional achievement, and lifetime achievement. Effective practice awards were most often presented at 45 awards, followed by early career professional achievement with 20. The awardees varied by place of employment with 37 employed at academic institutions, 33 in federal government positions, 32 in state or county government, seven in non-profit and two in clinical organizations. Awards were almost equally distributed by gender with 49 presented to women and 48 to men. Assessment of career advancement among previous awardees and acknowledging workforce challenges are gaps identified within the national awards process.

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Conclusion—Recognition of deserving MCH professionals sets the standard for those entering the field of MCH epidemiology and offers opportunity to recognize those who have built capacity and improved the health of women, children, and families.

Keywords

Maternal and child health epidemiology; National awards; Perinatal epidemiology

Purpose

The National Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Epidemiology Awards recognize the scientific, programmatic, and administrative accomplishments of MCH leaders in the field. Moreover, the awards incentivize other professionals in MCH to disseminate new or innovative work occurring across the United States, and offer opportunity to acknowledge impact nationally, and at the state and local levels. The awards were initiated in 2000 and recipients reported previously, though awardee demographics have not been historically reviewed. This summary presents the definitions of all awards including refinements to increase inclusion of different types of eligible nominees, describes the diversity of awardees by gender, and place of employment at the time of the award, and comments on gaps identified in the recognition of MCH epidemiology professionals.

Description

The Coalition for Excellence in MCH Epidemiology (referred to as ‘the Coalition’) has nationally recognized the significant contributions of individuals, teams, institutions, and leaders committed to improving the health of women, children, infants, and families by advancing public health knowledge, practice, research, teaching, mentoring, and data use (Sappenfield, 2001; Sappenfield & Chavez, 2002; Sappenfield et al., 2003, 2004; Kroelinger & Sappenfield, 2010; Kroelinger, 2011; Kroelinger & Jones, 2012; Kroelinger et al., 2014, 2016). The Coalition is represented by 16 MCH agencies and organizations (Table 1), with the goal of promoting excellence in the field of MCH epidemiology. The purpose of the national awards is to highlight contributions to MCH in the following four thematic areas (CityMatCH website):

1. Advancing public health knowledge through MCH epidemiology and applied research;
2. Improving public health practice through the effective use of MCH data and epidemiology;
3. Strengthening MCH public health practice through excellence in teaching, mentoring, and training in the use of data, epidemiologic methods, and applied research; and
4. Providing leadership to enhance the political will to advance public health knowledge and practice and the effective use of MCH data, epidemiology, and applied research.

These four areas are represented by awards in six categories which are listed below with a short description; the categories have been refined over time to broaden the eligibility criteria intended to increase the number and diversity of nominees (CityMatCH website).

Greg Alexander Award for Advancing Knowledge—Advancing Public Health Knowledge Through Epidemiology and Applied Research

The purpose of this national or international award is to recognize individuals and organizational teams from a variety of disciplines who have made a substantial contribution to advancing the knowledge base aimed at improving the health of women, children, and families. It is expected that the new knowledge contributed by the awardee has led the MCH field to consider new approaches and or discover new findings related to a MCH problem.

Effective Practice Award at the Community, State, and National Levels—Improving Public Health Practice Through Effective Use of Data, Epidemiology, and Applied Research

The purpose of this award is to recognize individuals, organizational leaders, organizational units, and institutions who make significant contributions to public health practice in MCH at the community, state, tribal, or national levels through the effective use of data and epidemiology. This award has been expanded to include effective practice at the national, state, and community level to increase diversity in eligible nominations.

Outstanding Leadership Award—Enhancing the Political Will to Advance Knowledge and Support Public Health Practice Through Effective Use of Data, Epidemiology, and Applied Research

The purpose of this award is to recognize leaders and organizational teams who serve at a local, state, or national level and who have made significant contributions to the field by enhancing the political will to advance knowledge and to support public health practice through effective use of data, epidemiology, and applied research.

Excellence in Teaching and Mentoring Award—Improving MCH Public Health Practice Through Excellence in Teaching; Training in the Use of Data, Epidemiologic Methods, and Applied Research; and Mentoring of Students, Trainee, Fellows, and Early Career Professionals

The purpose of this award is to recognize an individual or organization with a strong history of excellence in teaching; training in the use of data, MCH epidemiologic methods, and applied research; and/or has an outstanding record of mentoring students, trainees, fellows, and early career professionals. This award, first offered in 2006, was focused on teaching and training in the use of data, epidemiologic methods, and applied research. In 2014 this award was expanded to emphasize mentoring of early career professionals, increasing

eligible nominees to faculty who may work in non-tenured track teaching positions. Also, adding the mentoring criterion provides support for earlier career faculty to be competitively nominated.

Early Career Professional Achievement Award

The purpose of this award is to recognize an early career, outstanding professional leader whose work demonstrates significant contributions to the MCH epidemiology field in one or more of the other award categories. This award had been previously defined for receipt by MCH professionals below the age of 40. To expand the definition of early career and increase eligibility, in 2016, this award was expanded to allow the nomination of any MCH professional with less than 10 years of experience working in the field MCH following a terminal degree, removing the age limitation. By removing the age requirement, the early career professional award has increased the professional population of eligible nominees.

Zena Stein and Mervyn Susser Award for Lifetime Achievement

The purpose of this award is to recognize an internationally or nationally known expert or team of experts who have contributed broadly and substantially to the advancement of the field of MCH epidemiology throughout their career, and whose work has a significant and lasting impact.

Potential award recipients are nominated by peers and the final awardees are selected by the National MCH Epidemiology Awards Selection Committee, comprised of members of the Coalition, for official recognition during the biennial CityMatCH Leadership and MCH Epidemiology Conference, with further acknowledgment on the CityMatCH website, (CityMatCH website) and in this summary (Table 2).

Assessment

Since inception, the Coalition has presented 111 awards to deserving nominees (Table 2). The category most frequently awarded is Effective Practice. Recognition of MCH epidemiology work impacting national, state, and community levels offers opportunity to acknowledge accomplishments in varied settings. To date, 45 awards have been given for Effective Practice including 13 at the national level, 18 at the state level, and 14 at the community level. Early Career Professional Achievement is the next most presented award, with 20 awardees, followed by the Greg Alexander Award for Advancing Knowledge offered to 18 awardees. The Outstanding Leadership award and the Zena Stein and Mervyn Susser Award for Lifetime Achievement follow with 14 awards presented for leadership and eight awards presented for lifetime achievements. Finally, the Outstanding Teaching and Mentoring award has been presented to six awardees. All categories of awards have included recipients from all areas of public health (e.g., researchers, federal, state, or county health departments, and community advocates).

Awardees represent diverse types of MCH professionals, employed in various positions supporting MCH populations they serve with almost equal distribution of awards by gender. Among all previous awardees, 37 were employed at academic institutions, 33 in federal

government, 32 in state or county government (22 at state health departments and 10 at county health departments), seven employed by non-profit organizations and two in clinical organizations (Table 2). Examining gender, 97 awards of 111 were presented to individual awardees, and of those, 49 have been presented to women and 48 to men.

Public Health Gaps and Implications

Recent literature suggests that national awards in medicine and science lack diversity and equity. For instance, in the fields of emergency medicine, neurology, pathology, physical medicine and rehabilitation, differences persist in the proportion of female physician receipt of national awards compared with male physicians (Silver et al., 2017, 2018; Wobker et al., 2022; Jacobs et al., 2023) with some awarding male physicians more than five to one (Silver et al., 2017). Moreover, in a recent study of national awards for early and mid-career researchers among scientific societies, a guidance developed for ‘best researcher’ awards encouraged nominations of individuals from diverse groups, termed ‘under-represented,’ but the guidance did not clearly define these groups or criteria by which these nominations could be evaluated (Lagisz et al., 2023). Similarly, awards targeting early career professionals in ecology and evolution were inflexible with the age requirements (Lagisz et al., 2023). Lastly, most awards given to scientists in the United States were more likely to be titled using male names, potentially reinforcing preferences for male awardees, evidenced by only 31% of awardees identifying as female prior to 2010 (Lagisz et al., 2023). In epidemiology, though more women have been entering the field, evidence suggests that fewer are chairing academic departments, publishing as senior authors on manuscripts, and are less likely to be chief editors in scientific journals, despite the significant increase in membership of women in professional societies (Schisterman et al., 2017; Aldrich et al., 2019). Limited leadership opportunity impacts career trajectory and recognition (Aldrich et al., 2019). By comparison, the MCH epidemiology awards, as discussed in this paper, are almost equally distributed by gender and offer a flexible definition of early career to accommodate individuals who may enter the field of MCH later or experience breaks in a career for various reasons (e.g., parenting responsibilities, higher education opportunities). Though the awards do not reflect the distribution of working MCH professionals by gender, the proportion of women awarded by the Coalition is higher than in other areas of science.

Although the MCH epidemiology awards have diversity in representation by professional type and gender, gaps exist. Additional assessment of past awardees could provide further understanding of how the MCH epidemiology awards influence career trajectory and advancement. In a recent study of orthopedics, although a national award was developed to recognize women’s research, post-award only 62.5% held leadership positions and less than half were faculty at top 5 orthopedic surgery programs in a review of previous awardees (Czerwonka et al., 2023). Future review of award recipients, by the Coalition, could provide insight into the career trajectories of awardees by gender and their impacts in the field of MCH epidemiology in the decade following award receipt.

Challenges among the larger MCH public health workforce including decreasing public health budgets, retirements of those in the workforce, reorganizations, furloughs, and vacant public health positions (Kavanagh, 2015) impact the structure and function of

MCH in public health. Additionally, leadership workforce development and training opportunities in MCH are limited (CityMatCH training website; CityMatCH archived training website), though organizations continue to modify training content in response to MCH professional feedback (Kroelinger et al., 2012; HRSA doctoral training website; CityMatCH training website). To address these workforce and leadership gaps in the field of MCH, federal agencies, professional organizations, and state and local health departments have collaborated to place senior MCH epidemiologists, student interns and fellows in the field (Rochat et al., 1999; CDC assignees website; AEF fellows website; HRSA MCH Workforce website). These agencies have also developed continuing education programs (CityMatCH training website) and workforce development capacity-building grants (HRSA MCH Workforce website) for MCH professionals that support engagement regardless of level of experience. Improving workforce and leadership opportunities for all MCH professionals can address gaps identified in this review—offering resources beyond training to early career professionals in MCH epidemiology.

The Coalition and the MCH awards were initiated to recognize leadership contributions in MCH epidemiology and highlight recipient commitment to improving the health of women, children, and families (Sappenfield, 2001). By acknowledging current award category gaps requiring additional attention, and understanding career trajectory and workforce development opportunities, the Coalition can improve future awards processes.

Conclusion

The Coalition is encouraged to review the findings in this assessment and address gaps identified. To support continued recognition of excellence, the nomination announcement for the next cycle of the National MCH Epidemiology Awards will be issued in January of 2024. Coalition members urge readers to consider the nomination of peers and colleagues in all award categories highlighting their important scientific, programmatic, and administrative contributions to the field of MCH epidemiology.

Though this summary shares how the Coalition revised award criteria and categories over the last two decades and provides a review of awardees by place of employment and gender, further changes are necessary to emphasize inclusion and representativeness. As the concept of equity continues to gain momentum in public health (Liburd et al., 2020; Brownson et al., 2023; CDC's Health Equity Intervention and Action Principles; CDC's CORE Commitment to Health Equity), assuring awardees represent the diverse populations served in MCH and support implementation of equitable practices in program and leadership reinforces recognition of this concept. Such change not only will improve award impact and relevance, it also ensures the awards can remain an integral part of recognizing emerging and established leaders in MCH who are moving the field forward.

Data Availability

Policies are in the public domain.

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Significance

What is Already Known on the Subject

Recognition of extraordinary contributions among high performers in the field of MCH epidemiology offers key insights to sustained exemplary performance from these leaders.

What this Study adds

The awards offer an opportunity to highlight the significant contributions of the national-level awardees to a larger peer audience offered by the *Maternal and Child Health Journal* and feature the recognition among diverse types of public health professionals.

Table 1

Coalition for excellence in maternal and child health epidemiology member organizations. 2000–2022

American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)
American Public Health Association (APHA)
Association of Maternal & Child Health Programs (AMCHP)
Association of Schools of Public Health (ASPH)
Association of Teachers of Maternal and Child Health (ATMCH)
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Division of Reproductive Health (DRH)
City MatCH
Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists (CSTE)
Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB)
Maternal and Child Health Journal (MCHJ)
National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO)
National Association for Public Health Statistics and Information Systems (NAPHSIS)
National Birth Defects Prevention Network (NBDPN)
National Institutes of Health (NIH), Eunice Kennedy Shriver
National Institute of Child Health & Human Development (NICHD)
National March of Dimes Foundation
Society for Pediatric and Perinatal Epidemiologic Research (SPER)

National maternal and child health epidemiology award recipients by award category, 2000–2021

Table 2

Year/Level	Award Title and Recipient
<i>Greg Alexander Award for Advancing Knowledge</i>	
2021	Wanda Barfield, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
2018	Eugene Declercq, Boston University
2016	Carol J. Rowland Hogue, Emory University
2014	KS Joseph, University of British Columbia, Vancouver
2012	Laura Schieve, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
2012	Mathew Gillman, Harvard University
2011	Paul Newacheck, University of California, San Francisco
2010	Gopal Singh, Health Resources and Services Administration
2009	Allen Wilcox, National Institutes of Health
2008	Patricia O'Campo, University of Toronto
2007	Michael Kramer, McGill University
2006	James Collins, Children's Memorial Hospital, Chicago
2005	Mark Klebanoff, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development
2004	David Savitz, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
2003	Michael Kogan, Health Resources and Services Administration
2002	Nigel Paneth, Michigan State University
2001	Greg Alexander, University of Alabama at Birmingham
2000	Milton Kotelchuck, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
<i>Effective Practice—Community, State, and National Levels</i>	
2021	
Community Level	Theresa Seagraves, Franklin County Public Health
State Level	Massachusetts Racial Equity Strategic Pathway Implementation Team (RESPT), Massachusetts Department of Public Health
National Level	Childbirth Connection
2020	
State Level	Dara Daneen Mendez, University of Pittsburgh
National Level	The National Survey of Children's Health Team
2018	

Year/Level	Award Title and Recipient
Community Level	Aileen Duldulao, Multnomah County Health Department
State Level	Puerto Rico Department of Health's Division of Maternal, Child, and Adolescent Health, Puerto Rico Department of Health
2016	
Community Level	Audrey M. Stevenson, Salt Lake County Health Department, Massachusetts Oral Health Steering Committee
2014	
State Level	Bruce Cohen, Massachusetts Department of Public Health
State Level	Massachusetts Pregnancy to Early Life Longitudinal (PELL) Data System Team, Massachusetts Department of Public Health
National Level	Marion MacDorman, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
2012	
State Level	Donald Hayes, Family Health Services Division, State of Hawaii
2011	
Community Level	Center for Women's Health, Trover Health Systems
State Level	C. Meade Grigg, Florida's Office of Health Statistics and Assessment, State Registrar of Vital Statistics
State Level	Isabelle Horon, Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
2010	
State Level	Kenneth Rosenberg, Oregon Public Health Division
National Level	Maternal Health Team for 2009 Pandemic H1N1 Influenza Response, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
2009	
Community Level	Priscilla Guild, Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research
State Level	Maternal and Child Health Epidemiology Unit, Section of Women's, Children's, and Family Health, Division of Public Health, Alaska Department of Health and Social Services
2008	
Community Level	Institute for Health, Policy, and Evaluation Research, Duval County Health Department
National Level	CityMatCH, University of Nebraska Medical Center
2007	
Community Level	Kimberlee Wyche-Etheridge, Nashville-Davidson Health Department
State Level	Wanda Barfield, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Level	Carrie Shapiro-Mendoza, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
2006	
State Level	Douglas Paterson, Michigan Department of Community Health
National Level	Stephanie Ventura, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
2005	

Year/Level	Award Title and Recipient
Community Level	Los Angeles County STD Program
State Level	Richard Lorenz, Oklahoma State Department of Health
National Level	Stella Yu, Health Resources and Services Administration
2004	
Community Level	Carol Brady, Northeast Florida Healthy Start Coalition
State Level	Paul Buescher, North Carolina Division of Public Health
National Level	Laura Kann, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
2003	
Community Level	Countryside Lead Prevalence Study Team
State Level	Garland Land, Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services
National Level	Larry Edmonds, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
2002	
Community Level	Carolyn Slack, Columbus Health Department
State Level	Gilberto Chavez, California Department of Health Services
State Level	New Mexico and Navaho PRAMS Collaborative
National Level	Carol Hogue, Emory University
2001	
Community Level	Kathy Carson, Public Health Seattle-King County
State Level	Bao-Ping Zhu, Michigan Department of Community Health
National Level	Hani Atrash, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
2000	
Community Level	Pinellas County Healthy Start
State Level	Aaron Roome, Connecticut Department of Public Health
National Level	Arden Handler, University of Illinois at Chicago
Outstanding Leadership	
2021	Audra Robertson Meadows, University of California at San Diego
2020	David Goodman, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion
2016	Margaret A. Honein, National Center on Birth Defects and Development Disabilities
2014	Deborah Allen, Bureau of Child, Adolescent, and Family Health, Boston Public Health Commission
2012	Christina Bethell, Oregon Health and Sciences University
2009	Donna Peterson, College of Public Health, University of South Florida

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Year/Level	Award Title and Recipient
2008	William Hollinshead III, Rhode Island Department of Health
2006	Jeffrey Gould, Stanford University
2005	Jose Cordero, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
2004	Magda Peck, University of Nebraska Medical Center
2003	William Sappenfield, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
2002	Deborah Klein Walker, Massachusetts Department of Public Health
2001	Peter van Dyck, Health Resources and Services Administration
2000	Claude Earl Fox, Health Resources and Services Administration
	<i>Excellence in Teaching and Mentoring</i>
2020	Daniel Asnamaw Enquobahrie, University of Washington
2016	Kristin M. Rankin, University of Illinois at Chicago
2012	Michelle Williams, Harvard University
2009	Donna Strobino, Johns Hopkins University
2007	Russell Kirby, University of Alabama at Birmingham
2005	Deb Rosenberg, University of Illinois at Chicago
	<i>Early Career Professional Achievement^a</i>
2020	Meagan Robinson, Virginia Department of Health
2020	Kristin Palmsten, Health Partners Institute
2018	Catherine Vladutiu, Maternal and Child Health Bureau
2018	Sharyn Parks Brown, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
2016	Michael Grady Smith, South Carolina Bureau of MCH
2016	Ashley H. Hirai, Maternal and Child Health Bureau
2014	Susanna Visser, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
2012	Lisa Bodnar, University of Pittsburgh
2011	Reem Ghandour, Health Resources and Services Administration
2010	Amina Alio, University of South Florida
2009	Brian Castrucci, Georgia Division of Public Health
2008	Stephen Blumberg, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
2007	Charlan Kroelinger, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
2006	Jihong Liu, University of South Carolina
2005	Stephanie Schrag, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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Year/Level	Award Title and Recipient
2004	Kay Tomaszek, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
2003	Michael Lu, University of California at Los Angeles
2002	Joann Petrini, National March of Dimes Foundation
2001	Cande Ananth, Robert Wood Johnson Medical School
2000	Wendy Struchen, Pinellas County Healthy Start
<i>Zena Stein and Mervyn Susser Award for Lifetime Achievement</i>	
2020	Donna M. Strobino, Bloomberg School of Public Health, John Hopkins University
2018	Marie Clare McCormick Harvard University
2016	Roger Rochat, Emory University
2014	Walter Rogan, National Institutes of Health
2009	Bernard Guyer, Johns Hopkins University
2007	Irvin Emanuel, University of Washington
2006	David Erickson, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
2005	Zena Stein and Mervyn Susser, Columbia University

^aPreviously entitled, ‘Young Professional Achievement’ award