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SLU Looks at Putting Research into Practice

\$4.8 Million in Grants Helps Connect What We've Learned With How We Live

ST. LOUIS -- Saint Louis University School of Public Health has received a pair of grants totaling more than \$4.8 million to find out how to put research results to work in fighting cancer and chronic diseases.

"We are spending \$25 to \$30 billion annually on health-related research. We need better ways to put our rich list of discoveries into practice," says Ross Brownson, Ph.D., professor of epidemiology at Saint Louis University School of Public Health.

"The precious resources we have in public health need to be spent on things that have a high likelihood of improving the lives of people. These grants will help us focus on finding the best possible way to let health policy makers and professionals at state health departments know about what we've found to make people healthier."

Studying Stories

A five-year, \$2.5 million grant from the National Cancer Institute will study whether scientific research that is presented through a story that personalizes a health problem resonates louder with lawmakers than traditional data reports that include elements such as policy briefs or statistical summaries.

"It's a scientific study of storytelling," Brownson says. "It's novel, and I don't think anyone has systematically tested the power of stories to communicate cancer prevention messages to policy makers. We're looking at how to make information more memorable so that lawmakers are more likely to take action."

For instance, researchers might tell about a young woman from a legislator's home district who had breast cancer and, because of early detection, survived. The anecdote would include the same type of information found in a more traditional presentation -- data about high-risk groups and screenings -- but the tone would be different. The researchers would compare that story to a data-based presentation of scientific information and epidemiological trends.

"We want to see which works better, a typical scientific data presentation or something that relates a personal story," Brownson says.

Helping State Health Departments

Another grant, providing \$1.3 million over three years from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, will look at what helps or hinders state health departments in taking what researchers learn about fighting chronic disease and putting it into practice in communities.

Brownson chose to study relationships with state health departments, which are often the front line in suggesting programs and policy changes that have broad impact on people's lives.

"There's a lot of scientific evidence about what works and what doesn't," Brownson says. "But there are barriers keeping what we've learned from reaching the people who need that information."

He said researchers will try to figure out what obstacles prevent findings from being put into practice and develop solutions that they will test in six states. They will focus on diseases that include obesity, heart disease and cancer.

Saint Louis University School of Public Health is one of only 38 fully accredited schools of public health in the United States and the nation's only School of Public Health sponsored by a Jesuit university. It offers master's degrees and doctoral programs in six public health disciplines and a number of joint degrees involving business, law, medicine, nursing and social work. It is home to 12 nationally recognized research centers and draws students from across the United States and from 38 foreign countries.