

In the Public Interest

Journalism professor breaks down barriers between scientists and the public to explain new and emerging diseases.

AS NEWS OF SWINE FLU CASES SWIRL in the media this year, Mark Walters, associate professor of journalism at USF St. Petersburg, sees the global pandemic as another chance to help the public understand the source of emerging diseases – humans.

The journalist-turned-veterinarian-turned-professor focuses on communicating scientific information for the sake of public health through his writing and workshops tailored for scientists and journalists. And with viruses such as swine flu working their way into human bodies,

his message regarding emerging diseases resonates more than ever.

“We aren’t victims,” Walters said. “We’re perpetrators of almost all new diseases. The myth is we’re sitting here minding our own business and here come these nasty diseases, but it’s not like that at all.”

After Walters received his doctorate of veterinary medicine from Tufts University, where he focused on conservation medicine, he wrote *Six Modern Plagues* and *How We’re Causing Them*, in which he explains how ecological, demographic and industrial roots of diseases need to be mitigated to improve public health.

“The bottom line is that public health is not just about defense, it’s about offense,” says Walters, whose

USF St. Petersburg associate professor Mark Walters communicates scientific information for the sake of public health. He points to humans as the source of emerging diseases.

work has taken him from Alaska to Asia, from Africa to Nepal, and throughout South America and Europe – often landing him at ground zero for new diseases.

His next book will examine influenza, a virus that appears in new strains every year, and answer possibly life-saving questions. Why is influenza so dangerous? How do new strains emerge? What do they mean for public health, and how can they be prevented? He will look at the elaborate global surveillance system for detecting influenza, the origin of the virus in birds and other animals, and the latest science on the periodic emergence of pandemics.

With knowledge of the science behind disease, Walters’ imparts the importance of science communication to his students. He teaches science journalism, among other courses and often writes about the connection between human health and the environment. In 2008, he organized a conference for scientists and journalists at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies with support from the Environmental Protection Agency. The conference created a forum for scientists and journalists to understand the methodologies of each field. In another book project, Walters will create communication guides for scientists based on hundreds of hours of documenting how scientists communicate with the public.

“These will be guides for scientists who want to reach beyond their peers,” Walters says. “It’s important for scientists because their funding depends on it.”

His focus on breaking down the barriers between scientists and the public has reached international audiences. Gretchen Kaufman, director of the Tufts Center for Conserva-

tion Medicine, has witnessed the impact.

“The practice of science and health journalism is a critical public service that helps the general public understand the complexity of the world,” Kaufman said. “Mark has a unique complement of talent and training, including his veterinary training, which provides important insights into a very difficult and changing area of health – something which should be important to all of us.”

– Melanie Marquez



JOSEPH GAMBLE