

Duke-Margolis Internship Reflection Blog

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I decided to pursue an internship with the Margolis Center this summer because I truly believe that policy in any capacity, but especially public policy, is one of the most powerful tools for implementing widespread change. Policy is a proven way to ensure every single person the fundamental human right to high-quality health care, and I wanted to seek out an opportunity to join my passion for research, specifically as it relates to cognitive health, with my itch to learn more about policy and its real-world implications. I came into this summer hoping to learn how to best utilize research to leverage policies that consider those most effected by the drastic health inequities our country and ultimately develop tangible, upstream, solutions. My work at the Margolis Center has helped me learn all that and more; health policy demands us to consider a multitude of stakeholder perspectives and work to understand how those differing goals and motivations will intersect, and, eventually, create meaningful change through implementing policy.

My projects this summer aimed to convene these diverse stakeholder groups and mediate fruitful discussions between them surrounding potential therapeutics for treating Alzheimer's disease (AD). One drug, aducanumab, was approved by the FDA with breakthrough therapy designation in June, and multiple other drugs are on a similar pathway to approval. These new drugs have the potential to positively impact millions of Americans, but can only do so if scientists, payers, regulators, lawmakers, patients, and caregivers can all effectively communicate their needs and concerns with one another. These conversations are particularly important for this type of new drug because of the lack of disease-altering treatments currently available, the size of the AD patient population, and scientific uncertainties about how Alzheimer's disease pathologically causes cognitive decline.

Coming from researching Alzheimer's disease through a public health lens, I didn't have much exposure to the impact that payment structures and regulatory decisions have on access to and development of these new treatments. As such, my summer began with a steep learning curve on public and private payment systems; I researched how they interact with health systems and pharmaceutical companies to decide what to cover and how much to pay for treatments along with FDA approval processes and stakeholder needs. Although this was initially daunting, I became fascinated by the interconnectedness of it all along the way and found myself much more interested in drug pricing policy than I ever thought I would be. Understanding the regulatory lifecycle has helped me better communicate scientific findings with broad, non-academic audiences and communicate community priorities to scientific audiences. Positioning myself in the center of these conversations and facilitating cross-industry collaboration is a role I have found incredibly rewarding and sparked my interest to continue to work in health policy. Understanding multiple interpretations of such fast-paced and time-relevant innovation is invigorating, especially knowing that the collaborations I aim to create will have tangible impacts on the wellbeing of people across the country.

By the end of the summer, I was able to attend a roundtable that brought together patient advocacy organizations, scientific experts, governmental policymakers, and insurers to foster a lively, honest discussion about ideas for administering and paying for important breakthrough therapeutics in the Alzheimer's space. This experience was among the most valuable of the summer, as I was fortunate enough to travel to D.C. to attend the meeting in person and meet everyone who had a hand in bringing the event together. It was fascinating to hear the different concerns and perspectives each stakeholder brought to the table. I was surprised to see first-hand how such a wide range of people were able to

come together and think of so many ways to achieve the same goal: equitable access to safe treatment. Especially given the polarized political climate in the United States, it was both refreshing and inspiring to be a fly on the wall in a room full of people truly trying to work together and improve the lives of people across the country.

I am so grateful to have worked with such a dynamic team this summer. Working within a smaller group of a larger workstream helped me develop relationships with my mentors and collaborators as well as take initiative to ask questions and take on additional tasks and projects that I thought I might be interested in. Everyone I interacted with was so eager to share their work with me and get me excited about policy – and it worked. I have been able to dabble in work at the center spanning from antimicrobial resistance to AI to population health to Alzheimer’s disease in just 10 weeks, a set of experiences I don’t think I could have gotten anywhere else. Although many of the projects I was involved with focused on seemingly separate areas of health policy, more often than not, their policy influences and goals were intertwined. I love how interdisciplinary and fast-paced my projects have been; seeing how quickly policy can change and learning to pivot and update our work accordingly made every day a riveting new learning opportunity for me. The unique ability of the teams within my workstream to conduct thorough, focused analyses on subject areas and then broaden those findings to understand how they influenced the broader portfolio and health policy ecosystem was captivating, and a skill I will take with me and continue to sharpen moving forward.

I ultimately hope to pursue a graduate degree in public health and spearhead interdisciplinary initiatives that connect critical research findings to community-informed policies. My experience this summer has given me insights into how communities interact with policy and the importance of their voices throughout the research and lawmaking processes, as well as exposed me to policy spaces I will consider working in post-graduation. The opportunity to connect with both new and experienced scholars who think critically and innovatively about health practices has been an incredible learning experience to explore the connections between policy and research, and I can’t wait for what’s to come in my health policy journey.