

Brown president speaks on health issues at humanities center

SCOTT KINGSLEY, COGUT CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES, BROWN



Brown University President Christina A. Paxson spoke on health care issues at the Cogut Center for the Humanities in December.

BY MARY KORR
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PROVIDENCE – Brown University president Christina H. Paxson spoke on health inequality, equity and ethics at The Cogut Center for the Humanities annual invitational lecture in December.

An economist, she initially worked on international economic problems of labor supply, mobility, savings, inequality, and aging. This evolved into a focus on the relationship of economic factors to health and welfare over a person's lifetime.

Paxson described herself as a “social scientist.” A National Institutes of Health (NIH)-funded research project took her to Africa to study children who were orphaned by the death of their parents from HIV.

She began the lecture by stating she had a “deep concern about health in-

equality that we see in society related to social disadvantage. This relationship, the fact that people who are more disadvantaged tend to have worse health outcomes, is a cause of deep concern among economists, epidemiologists, people who work in health care and ethicists.”

In the hour-long presentation, she offered evidence of the relationship between socioeconomic status and health, centered on her own research and that of others. “Wealthier people live longer and have lower morbidity,” she said and showed this through a spectrum of studies.

Much of her research has centered on health outcomes among economically disadvantaged children. “When you start looking at economic disparities and outcomes in later life and you start



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BRIEF BIO

Christina H. Paxson, PhD

19th president of Brown University (sworn in July, 2012)

Former dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of International and Public Affairs at Princeton University

Founded Princeton's Center for Health and Wellbeing

Founding director, principal investigator, of a National Institutes on Aging Center for the Economics and Demography of Aging at Princeton

1982 honors graduate of Swarthmore College; graduate degrees in economics at Columbia University (M.A., 1985; PhD, 1987)

Elected vice president of the American Economics Association, 2012

Elected to Council on Foreign Relations in 2012

Personal: A Pittsburgh native, she is married to Ari Gabinet, currently executive vice president and general counsel of Oppenheimer Funds. They have two sons, Nicholas and Benjamin.

unraveling that, you end up at age three. Poor health in childhood sets kids up for what happens over the course of their life.”

She identified causal factors: poor nutrition, perinatal exposure to smoking, environmental exposure to toxins, maternal stress, and lack of maternal prenatal care.

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS OF PRESIDENT PAXSON

"Five years later: Recovery from post-traumatic stress and psychological distress among low-income mothers affected by Hurricane Katrina." (with Elizabeth Fussell, Jean Rhodes and Mary Waters) *Social Science and Medicine*, 74: 150-157, 2012.

"The Impact of the AIDS Pandemic on Health Services in Africa: Evidence from Demographic Health Surveys," (with Anne Case). *Demography* 48:675-697, 2011.

Moreover, Paxson said, studies have shown poor children fared worse than healthier children with the same health problems, experiencing greater severity of illness, lower health care quality, and showed worse compliance with medical protocols.

"Lower-income children face a double burden," Paxson said. "They have more severe health conditions with worse outcomes. These children are not realizing their full potential because of poor health."

She also associated poor health in childhood with lower occupational and economic status as adults, poor health in middle age and worse cognitive states in old age. "Put it all together and you tell a good story that what happens early in life matters. So one of the lessons is that investments in the health of children are important."

Paying attention to educational policy is sound health policy, she added. "Try-

ing to make sure that kids graduate from high school could be one of the most important things we do for their health."

Post ACA-era

In the post-Affordable Care Act (ACA) era, the focus should be on health care quality, more prevention programs focusing on smoking cessation, nutrition, mental health and addiction services, and new models for delivery systems, she said.

The effort needs to encompass both children and adults, critical in an era when retirement ages are going up and Baby Boomers retire. "We are losing our safety net for ages 55 to 70," Paxson said.

As a result of the ACA, with more people insured, the need for primary care physicians, already in short supply, will only escalate. Paxson cited an innovative program at The Alpert Medical School, in partnership with Lifespan and the Rhode Island Foundation (RIF), which encourages students to go into primary care by engaging them with primary-care physicians who are offered a stipend through the RIF grant to serve as preceptors.

In addition, she said, there needs to be greater financial aid and incentives, such as debt forgiveness, to encourage medical students to consider primary care.

In the November–December issue of *Brown Alumni Magazine*, she said:

"The world of medicine in the United States is moving away from fee-for-service towards accountable-care organizations and the kind of models where groups of physicians and nurses and

physician's assistants are going to work together to keep populations of patients healthy. We [the Alpert Medical School] train doctors who are going to be the types of doctors that can operate in this new world of medical care and health care reform."

At the Cogut lecture, she also recognized the strengths of Brown's program in public health, soon to become a School of Public Health, as well as Brown's brain science program.

In regards to health equity, "everyone should have the opportunity to be a healthy person," Paxson said, and added, "health inequality and equity conversation has to be more than about health care." ❖



BROWN VIDEO: President Paxson discusses "Health Inequality: Economics, Ethics and Public Policy"