

# Public Health

**An Interview with Ashish K. Jha, MD, MPH, Dean of the School of Public Health,  
Professor of Health Services, Policy, and Practice, Brown University School of Public Health**

**EDITORS' NOTE** *A practicing physician, Ashish K. Jha, M.D., MPH, is recognized globally as an expert on pandemic preparedness and response as well as on health policy research and practice. He has led groundbreaking research around Ebola and is now on the front lines of the COVID-19 response, leading national and international analysis of key issues and advising state and federal policy makers. He came to Brown University School of Public Health after leading the Harvard*



Ashish K. Jha

*Global Health Institute and teaching at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and Harvard Medical School. Dr. Jha has published more than two hundred original research publications in prestigious journals such as the New England Journal of Medicine and the BMJ, and is a frequent contributor to a range of public media. He has extensively researched how to improve the quality and reduce the cost of healthcare, focusing on the impact of public health policy nationally and around the globe. Dr. Jha was born in Pursaulia, Bihar, India in 1970. He moved to Toronto, Canada in 1979 and then to the United States in 1983. In 1992, Dr. Jha graduated magna cum laude from Columbia University with a BA in economics. He received his MD from Harvard Medical School in 1997 and then trained as a resident in Internal Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. He returned to Boston to complete his fellowship*

*in General Medicine from Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School. In 2004, he completed his Master of Public Health degree at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. He was elected to the National Academy of Medicine in 2013.*

**INSTITUTION BRIEF** *Brown University School of Public Health (brown.edu/academics/public-health) is committed to tackling pressing health challenges and improving population health by advancing science and training tomorrow's leaders. Its nationally renowned research centers have expertise in key aspects of health and the ability to translate cutting-edge research into high-impact policies and care initiatives. The School's student-centered academic training and culture of collaboration prepare future health leaders to respond to urgent health challenges. Public Health at Brown goes beyond preventing disease to reshaping healthcare and safeguarding vulnerable populations.*

**How do you define the Brown University School of Public Health's mission and purpose?**

Our mission is to champion health and health equity around the world, to improve the health of all populations, especially those most vulnerable, by producing world-class public health scholarships, forging strong community

partnerships, and educating the next generation of diverse public health leaders. We tackle the big challenges facing human health and engage deeply with the world to meet these challenges.

**Brown University School of Public Health has a clearly defined set of values. Will you highlight these values and how they are at the foundation of the Brown University School of Public Health's culture?**

We value diversity, equity and inclusion, excellence and innovation, collaboration and community, curiosity and truth. These values are central to making the Brown School of Public Health an open, nurturing, and welcoming environment to those who don't always fit in at more traditional public health institutions or who don't think of themselves in the context of public health. We can stretch boundaries to bring in people who share our values and goals to work with us to confront what the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed: the social determinants of health, the racial inequities, the weaknesses in our public health infrastructure, the need for new global collaborations and partnerships.

**Will you provide an overview of the Brown University School of Public Health's initiatives and focus areas?**

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work continues on addiction, aging and mental health, as we move to create new centers for research, education and action on pandemic preparedness, climate change and health, data science, combating information disorders and addressing racism in public health to promote equity.

**How critical is the focus on research to Brown University School of Public Health’s impact and efforts?**

The Brown University School of Public Health ranks among the top five schools of public health for NIH funding with \$64 million in annual external funding. Our nationally renowned research centers and institutes focus training and research on key areas including HIV/AIDS, addiction, global health, aging and environmental health and will expand to include pandemic preparedness, climate change and health, and data science, among others.

**You have been on the front lines of the COVID-19 response. Where does the fight against the pandemic stand today?**

The fight isn’t over, as Americans and people around the globe recognize. We have new tools to fight COVID-19 – importantly, safe and effective vaccines, now available to children, too. We know how to stop and slow transmission, the importance of vaccines but also of mask-wearing indoors, and improving ventilation. Still, misinformation and disinformation keep too many from getting vaccinated and recognizing the difference between what works in stopping the spread of COVID-19 and what

doesn’t. We have made a lot of progress in the U.S. at a high cost in human suffering and death. People in too many nations have paid – and are still paying – the same price. We must do more to get more people vaccinated, here and around the globe, continue testing, improve data collection and analysis, and confront the inequities in our healthcare system that have left people in communities of color and economic stress bearing an unfair burden throughout this pandemic.

**How critical is it that there is a focus on lessons learned from the pandemic in order to be better prepared to address future public health crises?**

It is urgently and critically important to learn from this pandemic as we have from earlier pandemics. That process is already underway around our country and the globe. We are moving to advance this work through a new Center for Pandemic Preparedness we are creating at the Brown University School of Public Health.

**What do you see as the keys to effective leadership and how do you describe your leadership style?**

Effective leaders are good listeners and communicators, able to collaborate and create consensus around advancing shared values and goals. These skills – listening, communicating, collaborating, advancing shared goals – are central to my approach to this work.

**Did you always know that you were attracted to this type of work and that this was your passion?**

In high school, I thought I wanted to be a journalist and started down that path in college, but I found I really liked science. I spent college summers in India, where we lived with my father’s older brother, a medical doctor. Every morning, he would make rounds through his village. He provided most of that care for free, but the poor people he cared for would try to pay him with rice or other food. I loved that interaction and it moved me to consider medical school. It was in medical school that my passion for health and public health began.

**How do you measure the success of the Brown University School of Public Health’s work and how important is it for the organization to take moments to celebrate the wins?**

We aim to impact and inform public information and public health policy in the U.S. and around the globe. In this time of a pandemic, it has been difficult to stop for celebration when so many challenges remain that make the “wins” illusive, but it is important to recognize positive impact and change and to keep moving.

**What advice do you offer to young people interested in a career in medicine?**

Go for it! Talk to people who are engaged in medicine and public health. Where and when you can spend time with them on the job, do so to understand what they do and what it takes. This pandemic has pushed too many away from medicine and healthcare; this is hard – and in a pandemic especially – risky work. But it’s a field where you can literally change people’s lives, health and well-being. It is so worth doing. ●

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