

SIUE professors collaborate to bring health education to Ugandan communities

SEGUE

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Students and faculty members from all disciplines at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville frequently cross the globe to share their knowledge with people from all walks of life.

On this week's episode of Segue, host Greg Budzban, PhD, College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) dean, interviews Kathleen Vongsathorn, PhD, and Michelle Cathorall, DrPh, who are joining forces to bring attention to

global health and the role that history plays in current public health issues.

This episode will air at 9 a.m. Sunday, April 21, on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound and siue.edu/wsie.

Vongsathorn is an assistant professor in the CAS Department of Historical Studies. Cathorall is an assistant professor from the School of Education Health and Human Behavior's (SEHHB) Department of Applied Health. Vongsathorn earned a bachelor's in history from Carleton College in Minnesota before achieving master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom. Her research focuses on the intersection between history and current health practices, and she has published articles about public health attitudes and medical treatments in Uganda. She has researched and studied in the country for the last decade.

Cathorall earned a bachelor's from California State University Fullerton, as well as master's and doctoral degrees from the Universities of North Carolina at Greensboro and Chapel Hill, respectively. Her research spans the topics of global health, unintentional injury prevention and intervention development, and designing worksite health promotion programs and evaluations.

This summer, Vongsathorn and a team of students will be on independent missions to conduct research, and provide health education to the people of Uganda.

“The idea of being specifically asked to collaborate across disciplines, and not only just in history, was incredibly attractive,” Vongsathorn says. “The willingness and openness of other faculty who are willing to collaborate outside their departments was not something I had encountered anywhere else.”

“You are the first faculty member who has been hired under the Coordinated Hiring Initiative,” Budzban says. “It is specifically designed to create collaborations on campus. It’s wonderful that you have been able to reach out and work with one another.”

“The timing of Kathleen’s arrival on campus was perfect,” Cathorall mentions. “I worked to develop an internship available for our public health students in Uganda, and this will be our second time going into the country. Since she has worked in Uganda, she is the perfect match to talk to our students about health and the impact that history has on current issues.”

“Often, you have a program and its vision, but it doesn’t always work out perfectly,” Budzban says. “In this case, it seems as if it is tailor-made.”

The collaboration between Vongsathorn and Cathorall focuses on the study of medicine and public health in Uganda. Vongsathorn is interested in how health education plays a role in people’s healthcare-seeking behaviors.

“Around 80 percent of people in sub-Saharan Africa still use traditional medicine, so I was curious to see how they started to use hospital medicine and in what contexts they used hospitals,” Vongsathorn says.

“Through my research, I’ve found that health education plays a smaller role than what you would think, but that got me interested further in the idea of health education than before.

“In what way?” Budzban inquires.

“Health education, especially in our world today, has been a central part of international responses to health,” Vongsathorn replies. “Historically, just because an idea was transmitted, it did not mean that people acted upon that. This also occurs today. I found that when we looked into what factors did draw people to the hospitals, health education and being told about services was very far down on the list of reasons why they, or their parents, had started using that type of medicine.”

Use of medical services like dispensaries of medicine or hospitals depended on the reason people within Uganda were going to the hospital, Vongsathorn found. In pastoral societies, people who move frequently visited these sites for services like practical wound care.

“People’s use of these services depended on their education level and access to these facilities,” she continued. “The family’s relationship with midwives also plays a huge role in influencing them to come to the hospitals for birth.”

Last summer, Cathorall’s students conducted health education in Uganda. They provided needs assessments in communities around Ndejje University. Working with members of those communities, they developed education around a specific topic that was of high priority in the areas.

“Health education is not something that changes behavior,” Cathorall says. “Even though it is something necessary, it is not sufficient.

“This summer, our students will be conducting research and will conduct a survey about malaria in the communities around the university. That is our path moving forward—they will conduct small research activities and provide services that fit the needs of the communities along with the University Health Center.”

Cathorall and her students are seeking baseline information regarding diagnosis within certain time periods, who is being diagnosed and when, age differentiations in diagnosis, as well as barriers to treatment and prevention.

“It’s similar to the work that Kathleen does in that we all are looking at health education and what it takes to truly change people’s behavior, as well as showcasing what services are available to them,” she said.

To hear more about Vongsathorn and Cathorall’s research, tune in to Segue at 9 a.m. this Sunday, April 21, on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound and siue.edu/wsie.