

The Director's Column

Dr. Nils Hennig, Program Director



Spring is here. Welcome to another issue of the Scoop.

As we are approaching the end of the Academic Year I want to congratulate all graduates. For me it was a true privilege to get to know you. Having worked with some of you in my classroom, on the Applied Practice Experience, the Cumulating Experiences, discussing your research during Student Research Day, maybe having to address a

challenging issue in my office, just chatting while waiting together for the elevator, or discussing your progress in the program with your track advisor: I know that you have the skills, insights and compassion to make a difference in the world. I'm confident you will promote the core values of our program: community, sound science, diversity, social justice, and engagement.

We are graduating public health professionals in eight distinct tracks: Our Health Promotion and Disease Prevention graduates are prepared to tackle complicated issues like gun violence,

I know that you have the skills, insights and compassion to make a difference in the world. I'm confident you will promote the core values of our program: community, sound science, diversity, social justice, and engagement.

substance misuse and prescription drug overdose. They will help people and communities to make healthy choices so they can enjoy life. Our Biostatistics graduates will use their informatics and statistical expertise to support foodborne, waterborne and environmental disease outbreak investigations, research studies, and surveillance data analyses. Our Health Care Management graduates know how greed is destroying our healthcare system, and instead will deliver new, better models of health care, increasing benefits and lower costs for

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The Twitch of Nogales: How a Phobia Taught Me Empathy

By Deborah Watman, MPH Student in the Biostatistics Track



Photo: Our group posing with individuals in an unaccompanied migrant shelter in Mexico. Our backs are turned for security and privacy reasons. Photo credit: Stephen Cheng.

There is this twitch. An incessant tapping of shackled feet in the Tucson courthouse. Of wire-scabbed adolescent legs in the migrant shelter. Of my own Allbirds-swathed feet in the hacienda. In Nogales, Arizona, and Sonora, we twitch with the fear of the unknown.

As we drove up to the hacienda, dogs ran to greet our white van. Fluffy dogs and bigger scarier, panting black and tan dogs immediately set my phobic body on edge.

A phobia is an irrational, yet somewhat explainable, fear. My shaking limbs alight from a fear of not knowing when a dog will hover, sniff, lick, jump or bite. The fear is present regardless if the dog is lovable or malicious because the uncontrollable unknown is overpowering.

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The Twitch of Nogales: How a Phobia Taught Me Empathy *(continued from page 1)*

Several days later, during the question segment of an enlightening talk by Seagred, a long-time Nogales resident, I raised my hand. At the risk of feeling like a naive schoolkid, I asked, “Why?” Why was all this - the running, patrolling, catching, detaining, testifying and all the border talk, even a thing?

“Fear.”

Many Americans are afraid of losing jobs, of being attacked, Seagred explained. Fear. That is what has erected the walls, the long lines at border control – fear is what perpetuates this cycle of nightmares. If you are afraid, you create walls that functionally displace your own fear and transport it to those who are desperate to leave their own countries, and are now terrified.

We crossed back into the U.S. and I was filled with a sort of shame, a sadness to be returning to this exclusive country. Yes, some fear is a necessary form of protection for people. Yes, we may need border control to protect American neighborhoods from drug cartels, and perhaps we must focus on stabilizing our own citizens before helping others. Yes, we may need security to maintain order and safety within our country. But, does that necessitate all the barbed wire that cuts across the land and then across migrant legs? Do we really need all of it?

United States Courthouse, Tucson, Arizona

Dozens of men are seated in rows. Their legs, in unassuming jeans, tapping with the anxiety that charges when you know your life is about to turn from hope and back towards difficulty. Shackles restrained hands and ankles, whose twitching elicited clinking sounds of metal that incited the prickling behind our eyes. “Martin Lopez, Jose Fernandez...” They were called up by name, as they may have been called for graduation. Instead of a commencement gown, the name-caller dons the official judge’s robe as he sits alone, about to preside over their jurisdiction. “Are you aware that on March 25 you crossed the border illegally and with this trial you will give up your right to further legal actions and be sent back to Mexico?”

“Yes”. “Guilty.” Tap, tap, tap. The entire process is machine-like, as its name “Operation Streamline” indicates. The judge is emphatic and stern as he goes through the mechanics of deportation.

Camino a Casa: Unaccompanied Minor Shelter, Mexico

The law is different for those under the age of 18. Young migrants found on the U.S. side of the wall are returned to a shelter in Mexico. Social workers process the felony, contact family, and send kids back to the lives they tried to flee. We met these young adults, many with scrapes from resisting the barbed wire border. In jeans, and younger faces than their older counterparts in jail, their feet are unburdened by shackles but weighted with similar tremors. Through words and drawings, the creative arts bridge some of our cultural gaps as we share stories. My young partner drew his town on the right as I drew the hacienda on the left. We drew a path connecting us across the inked line that represented the wall that

ran through his town and mine. As we worked together, the young boy twitched. Because he too, did not know when he was going home. Or he knew, and was afraid of what awaited him.

Migrant Shelter, Tucson, Arizona

The kids are hyper-eager, running around, coloring with us, hugging us. They jump with the possibility of going somewhere new. They have already turned themselves in, seeking asylum, and have a sponsor who will allow them to cross the country where the American Dream lives on. Parents tremble with responsibility as their smiling children twitch with a new type of excitement, fear and the thrill of the unknown.

My fear of dogs is silly, trite and generally insignificant. But, Nisa and Jeff, the gracious, fun and personable owners of the hacienda noticed. They repeatedly moved the dogs away from me, because fear, baseless or not, is real, pervasive and debilitating. And love and kindness, as Jeff and Nisa understood, is its only antidote.

That is what we practiced in Arizona. We loved. Writing with the teenagers, coloring with the children, taking blood pressure of geriatric patients, immunizing dogs with anti-rabies vaccines, and mentoring high school students at the Tohono O’odham Nation. We opened our hearts to people who are so often afraid. Like Nisa and Jeff we were there to say - We recognize the fear that you are dealing with, the anxiety and the shakes that you feel, that pervade your body. We see you and we care. Empathy, is perhaps the precursor to love and kindness and it is, I believe, the driver of public health. We proactively work to create change, to do something that will make healthcare more accessible to people. It is why we went to Nogales, to serve and to learn and to feel.



Photo: Our group visiting Sells Hospital, the rural hospital in the Tohono O’odham Nation. Photo credit: Stephen Cheng.

I did not fly back to NY with answers or well-formed opinions about solving immigration or curing cynophobia. But I did return with a charley horse empathy muscle and a reinforced commitment to serve. With the idea that perhaps, the start of healing, or the proactive nature of public health, is to simply open up a little more, empathize a little deeper. Maybe one day, in what I recognize to be an idealized yet still inspiring pursuit, our empathy muscles will be so strong, we won’t have any fear to displace at all.

There are hundreds of languages in the world, but a smile speaks them all.

By Noor Mualla, MPH Student in the Outcomes Research Track

Operation Smile (OS) Jordan is part of a global alliance of Operation Smile foundations that provide free treatment for individuals born with cleft lip, cleft palate or other facial deformities. My journey with OS started as a 24-year-old medical student at Jordan University of Science and Technology, when a friend told me about one of their upcoming meetings. At the time, I was not aware of what I was getting myself into. I started volunteering in one of their medical missions in Jordan in 2011 and it was an experience that affected me personally and impacted my career path.

I was deeply moved by seeing the patients in the clinic. These patients suffered from cleft lip and cleft palate and could not afford to receive the necessary surgical and medical care. Both kids and adults who had previously covered their face with their hands to avoid stares were now able to walk with a confident smile. OS is a turning point in the lives of patients and their families. They shift from the sense of overwhelming

isolation that comes from social stigma, to feelings of hope in their ability to engage in their communities, participate in education and the workforce, and do better in all areas.

I scrubbed into the operating room and witnessed the impact of how a 45-minute surgery can affect someone's life. I assisted on screening days and in the recovery room. I was lucky enough to witness these people's smiles changing for the first time, and it was an incredible feeling.

That mission did not only change patients' lives. Since that day, my entire perception on life changed as well. I decided to use my medical degree and my Master of Public Health training to be more involved and make a difference as a physician in the field of global health.

I encourage everyone, especially young physicians and medical professionals, to get more involved with such missions to instill or strengthen their desire to help others and provide support to those who need it.



Photo: Before and after photo of Operation Smile patient. Available through the Operation Smile Jordan Facebook Group.

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consumers by fostering innovation and quality. Our Outcomes Research graduates will develop new evidence about benefits, risks, and results of treatment so that patients, physicians, public health practitioners and policy makers can make more informed decisions. Our Global Health graduates will work in collaboration with local communities and international agencies to address complex emergencies, new emerging disease outbreaks, and global maternal and child health issues, and will care and advocate with compassion for underserved populations and neglected patients. The work of our Epidemiology graduates will serve as a powerful counterargument to those who would dismiss the value of empiricism and its potential to create positive change. Their work will make it possible to reduce people's risk factors, design healthy communities, and lower the global burden of disease. Our Environmental Health graduates will protect the public from environmental hazards, promote a healthy environment, and advocate to appropriately address climate change. Our General Public Health graduates will strive for health equity, addressing unfair practices in housing, education and employment, engaging the social, political, and economic foundations that determine population health.

It is our students and graduates who always remind me of the aspirational, purpose-driven mission of public health. As public health practitioners, researchers, and educators, you will soon enhance the health of whole populations. But always remember that improving the health of each individual is the essence of public health. You will provide a human touch in an often inhumane environment, ultimately helping to reestablish human dignity. I wish you the best and I am looking forward to staying in touch!

This issue of the Scoop covers our annual trip to Nogales, Operation Smile, the experience of seeking asylum, the Charity Drag Race, finding employment at Mount Sinai, National Public Health Week, our Annual Public Health Career Fair, and the Student Advice Column. If you are a graduating, new or prospective student, faculty member, community partner, or just interested in the world of public health and our diverse program – enjoy!

Seeking Asylum — One Man's Journey

By Sanjana Inala, MPH student in the Epidemiology Track

All names and locations have been changed to protect the identity of all individuals.

Memories: Back in Jamaica

Mr. Enrique Alvarez wakes up nights feeling unsettled, his heart racing. The memories of being back in Jamaica are so vivid in his mind. He takes long and deep breaths. Enrique reminds himself he is safe now and he no longer has to be afraid.

We don't perceive Jamaica as a place rife with human rights violations, but rather associate the nation with tourism. Mr. Alvarez, however, fears being sent back to his home country because of the trauma he faced. He is one of the many asylum seekers to the United States, a number that, according to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), has tripled between 2012 and 2017 with a 1700% increase in applicants and a backlog of over 318,000 cases.¹

Mr. Alvarez described a pattern of being ostracized throughout his childhood and adolescence. Growing up, he was ridiculed by his classmates for his "feminine" mannerisms. People often questioned his sexual identity and preferences. To avoid the suspicion of his homosexuality, Enrique dated females. Unfortunately, he was outed as a gay man and he described the experience as, hell. "I just knew I needed to get out," he stated. Being raised in a very religious household, Mr. Alvarez's family was furious at the shame they believed he brought upon them, calling his homosexuality "atrocious and detestable." His parents believed he had a mental illness. The initial confrontation between Enrique and his family quickly escalated into a physical altercation. His parents beat him, resulting in facial injuries. His entire family proceeded to give him the silent treatment and their relationship became cold and strained. His mother removed all family photos in the home that included him.

Mr. Alvarez faced backlash from the community. People in Jamaica, including his friends, followed him and his parents, making comments. They called his mother at her workplace to harass her, and Enrique's work environment turned hostile after he had been outed. His co-workers made homophobic comments and physically

Mr. Alvarez worked hard to save enough money to leave Jamaica. He earned a scholarship to study at a college in the United States.

shoved Enrique. Mr. Alvarez knew he could not turn to the police in his community for protection since the community was homophobic. He had heard and witnessed brutal police beatings of members of the LGBTQ community. Mr. Alvarez had no one left to turn to – neither his family and friends nor the police.

Trying his best to ignore the verbal abuses of the community, Mr. Alvarez worked hard to save enough money to leave Jamaica. He earned a scholarship to study at a college in the United States where he finally felt at home. Unfortunately, Enrique discovered he was HIV positive while he was living in the United States. He explained "it was a huge turning point in my life." Although he is taking HIV medication currently, he knows that he would not have the same opportunity in Jamaica. The treatment is far less advanced and the stigma surrounding people who are HIV positive would prevent Mr. Alvarez from receiving any basic medication in Jamaica. He emphasized that if anyone in his country discovered he was HIV positive, "I would very much be dead."

He explained that there was only one doctor in Jamaica who treated patients with HIV and just being seen in or around the clinic, would reveal his health status.

Seeking Asylum

For this reason, Mr. Alvarez is seeking asylum in the United States. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, a refugee or asylum seeker has the right to protection in another country due to persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution because of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group (PSG), or political opinion.² Mr. Alvarez is an asylum seeker who fears persecution because he identifies as a gay man, and asylum law recognizes sexual identity as an immutable characteristic which constitutes membership in a particular social group. To be granted asylum in the U.S., he is required to submit an asylum application and evidence of the trauma and persecution he faced in Jamaica, due to his sexual identity. Unfortunately, individuals who are seeking protective status often leave their home countries quickly due to dangerous situations. It may be difficult to provide documentation and proof of past traumas and abuses and, in asylum claims based on sexual identity, it may be difficult for someone to prove that his sexual identity was socially visible to others in their country of origin. In spite of these hurdles, asylum applications under the nexus of membership in a particular social group are growing more rapidly than claims under any other category.

Fortunately, there are legal professionals who work to help these asylum seekers, and health care professionals who perform forensic evaluations to document the

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Mount Sinai Charity Drag Race Raises \$2700 for Ali Forney Center

By Gavriella Hecht, MPH Student in the Epidemiology Track

In 1988, a thirteen year-old gender non-conforming youth named Ali Forney entered the foster care system after being rejected by family. They ended up on the streets of New York City where they were exposed to both drugs and sex work. At seventeen, Forney began a journey towards activism by joining a program to help teens get off the streets and become independent. Forney became a peer-educator dedicated to HIV prevention and safe sex and a fierce advocate for the safety of homeless LGBTQ youth. On December 5th, 1997, Ali Forney was murdered at the age of 22. Their death turned the spotlight on the horrific living conditions of homeless LGBTQ youth.

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, on any given night, there are over 35,000 youth across the country who are homeless. An especially marginalized group within this vulnerable population includes homeless LGBTQ youth who are eight times more likely to become homeless compared to their non-LGBTQ counterparts. In 2002, a youth worker named Carl Siciliano opened the Ali Forney Center (AFC) – a namesake honoring the life, work, and memory of Ali Forney. Since its inception, AFC has gone from a 6-bed institution to aiding nearly 1,400 homeless LGBTQ youth annually, protecting them from

homelessness by empowering them with tools to successfully live independently.

These two Mount Sinai student organizations, Out in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (oSTEM) and

The Stonewall Alliance hosted the Mount Sinai Charity Drag Race to support AFC and foster LGBTQ community engagement.

On January 31st, 2019, NYC drag performer Lagoon Bloo emceed the Charity Drag Race for an audience of 300 attendees. Four Mount Sinai drag performers: HeLena Heelz, Crispy Cream, Daisy Chains, and Holly Buckets entertained the audience by competing for the title of “Queer Miss Sinai.” Different



Photo: Talented drag performers at the Mount Sinai Charity Drag Race!

competition rounds included pageant questions, personal questions, talent, and lip syncing, and in the end Ms. Crispy Cream was crowned “Queer Miss Sinai.” The true success of the event was bringing together people from all backgrounds and walks of life to raise over \$2,700 for the Ali Forney Center and promote acceptance for the LGBTQ community.

From Sinai MPH Student to Sinai Employee

On February 27, 2019 four alumni shared their experience of finding employment at Mount Sinai. The panel discussion ended with a networking reception with representatives from Mount Sinai Human Resources.

The Panel and Networking event provided a lot of helpful information from both the Mount Sinai HR perspective, and from recent graduates from the MPH program. It was helpful to hear the reality of post-graduate life and process of the alumni getting into their current roles. The most useful tip I learned from the HR professionals was to tailor your resume to the specific open position. I personally hadn't thought to do it in the past, and it has proven to be successful since I started! Afterward, I connected with a few people on the panel and they have been helpful in my career search as well. — Rachel Rudich, MPH Student



Photo: Panelists Stephen DiBella, Katharina Turcios-Wiswe, MPH, Wil Lieberman-Cribbin, MPH, Adriana Sciafani, MPH, and Elizabeth Alago, MPH engage in discussion. Photo credit: Isaiah Brown.

National Public Health Week

Students and staff of the Graduate Program in Public Health organized events for National Public Health Week, April 1-7, 2019.

Cooked Film Screening & Panel Discussion:

I was excited to see Judith Helfand's new film *Cooked: Survival by Zip Code* and hear about the climate research happening at Mount Sinai. The film focused on issues that affect us all – especially New Yorkers after Hurricane Sandy. I'm considering climate research as a possible a career path! — *Kayla Collado, MPH Student*



Photo: Panelists responding to audience questions after the film screening. Cynthia Herrera, MS, Judith Helfand, Nicholas DeFelice, PhD. Photo credit: Isaiah Brown

Donation Drive for Grandma's Love, Inc.:

It was wonderful to work with Grandma's Love, Inc.! The founder and her team made us feel like part of the team too. Our donations were uniquely public health related, which added a nice touch! — *Kayla Collado, MPH Student*

Coordinating a donation drive in collaboration with the non-profit organization increased my awareness of the food environment and food insecurity in New York City and its contribution to other prevalent inequities. Overall, the service activity displayed the impact that our school could have through a small act, such as donating school and health supplies to children in Brooklyn. — *Stacey Pinto, MPH Student*



Photo: Founder Theresa Monforte-Caraballo with her staff and ISMMS students packing donation book bags. Photo credit: Isaiah Brown.

Violence Prevention & The #MeToo Movement:

It was deeply inspiring to spend time with women who have dedicated their lives to ending violence against women. The panelists discussed how the growth of the movement brought awareness to this complex issue and especially empowered traditionally disenfranchised populations to have a voice in the narrative around the prevention of sexual violence and intimate partner violence. This is a powerful lesson in how cultural context can create opportunities for novel progress in addressing long-standing public health crises. — *Sonia Lazreg, MPH Student*



Photo: Lynn Frederick Hawley, MA, Sharon Robinson, Gwen Wright responding to moderator Silva Sergenian's questions. Photo available through the Mount Sinai Sexual Assault and Violence Intervention Program.

This event and the MPH 0212 Life Cycle of Violence course significantly sparked my interest in the areas of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and rape. The messages relayed by the speakers were extremely powerful and effective in the effort to eliminate stigma experienced by survivors of such acts. — *Stacey Pinto, MPH Student*

How to Use Social Media to Advance Public Health Initiatives:

Even though I am a technologically naive late-adopter, I now have a grasp on the importance of using concise visuals and sharing vulnerable narratives to both educate various audiences on health topics and engage them in advocacy around policies that affect communities' ability to thrive. — *Sonia Lazreg*



Photo: Rebecca Kaplan and Tina Aswani Omprakash sharing their experience and tips. Photo available through the Crohn's & Colitis Foundation Instagram.

Annual Public Health Career Fair

The Annual Public Health Career Fair took place on March 7, 2019 for all students and alumni of the Graduate Program in Public Health. Representatives from over 20 organizations shared information on their part-time, full-time, and internship opportunities.



Photo: Career fair attendees visit Mount Sinai recruiters. Photo credit: Isaiah Brown.

The Career Fair was a great networking opportunity that did end up leading to multiple interviews and a job! The event prompted me to learn how to network and pitch myself to a company in a quick time frame. — *Sharleen Sanchez, MPH Student*

The employers ranged from community health organizations, hospital systems, consulting firms, and everything in between. Personally, I had never thought about consulting work. After speaking with recruiters, I realized that public health consulting is a diverse, fast-paced, and dynamic environment with opportunities to do new projects all the time, and might be the type of environment where I thrive. — *Gavi Hecht, MPH Student*

As a student branching into a new career, it made such a difference to talk to employers directly and learn what type of jobs are available. Some of the recruiters even took the time to explain how their application process works and what to look for when applying. Priceless information you can't get from a google search. The career fair is an excellent resource. — *Dijon Parker, MPH Student*

Seeking Asylum – One Man's Journey *(continued from page 4)*

psychological and physical abuses the asylum seekers have suffered in their home countries. Both groups of professionals often work pro bono. Health care providers often write medical and psychological affidavits to objectively document the persecution that asylum seekers have survived and to tell their stories. Some of those very physicians work through our organization, the Mount Sinai Human Rights Program (MSHRP). Students play an integral role in the program as clinical shadows on cases, in drafting the initial versions of the medical affidavits under direct faculty supervision, and through vital jobs that they hold on student-led teams which are involved with daily programmatic operations. It is important to note, MSHRP is open to any graduate level student at Mount Sinai. As a

The Mount Sinai Human Rights Program (MSHRP), students play an integral role in the program as clinical shadows on cases.

public health student, I had the opportunity to shadow forensic medical cases. The experience has been truly rewarding and I appreciate the chance to help these asylum seekers and to have hands-on involvement where I feel my work is impacting the lives of this population.

Mr. Enrique Alvarez is just one of the many individuals who fear persecution in their countries of origin and are afraid to be deported back home. According to the United Nations, human rights are “the rights that are inherent to all humans, regardless

of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion or any other social group.”³ Everyone is and should be entitled to these rights without discrimination.

References

¹Cissna, L. (2018, May 22). “Stopping the Daily Border Caravan: Time to Build a Policy Wall”. Retrieved from <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM11/20180522/108323/HHRG-115-HM11-Wstate-CissnaL-20180522.pdf>.

²United Nations. (n.d.). Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.html>.

³Human Rights. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/human-rights/>.

Fun at the Career Fair!



Photo: Students Xiaoyi Zeng, Vibhor Mahajan, Tamanna Obyed, Isaiah Brown, and Noor Mualla posing in their career fair attire!

Student Advice Column

By Jennifer Trabucco, MPH Student in the Epidemiology Track

Graduate school can be daunting – new classes, meeting faculty and fellow students, starting new projects, and more. To help guide us for these two years, I set out to answer some of the questions that first-year students have been silently asking themselves since day one. Second year students Htut Naing Soe (Epidemiology Track) and Rachel Rudich (Healthcare Management Track) share some answers.

Q: What was your most challenging class? How can we do well in the class?

Htut: MPH 0300 Introduction to Biostatistics. Read the assigned textbook. It helps!

Rachel: MPH 0400 Epidemiology. Form a study group. My friends and I met throughout the week to review the material. Be sure to attend every lecture.

Q: What are some “hidden gem” areas of Mount Sinai?

Htut: I don't know much about “hidden gem” areas but the restrooms on the 13th floor are the best restrooms in Annenberg.

Rachel: Annenberg 5th floor, all the way towards the back of the floor there is a graduate student study lounge. It's usually pretty quiet, take advantage of that.

Tre Otto is a cute little Italian place on 97th and Madison, great food. Champignon Cafe is a great coffee shop with some sandwich and soup type food also near school.

Q: What kind of resources would you recommend that you might not have been aware of as a first year student?

Htut: Assigned books and articles are pretty good. Sometimes, I read some materials on the website: <http://sphweb.bumc.bu.edu/otlt/MPH-Modules/Menu>.

Rachel: When I was a first year “Handshake” app didn't exist at Mount Sinai. I think it's a great resource (thank you Kelly Gentry!). Take advantage of that and the “Friday Finds”.

So there you have it folks! Some wise words of wisdom from those who have been through it. I hope this helps you all in your future planning and your careers going forward. I would like to formally thank my interviewees for their time and insight. Good luck everybody and remember to take it one day at a time.

With love,
Jen

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Public Health Research Day was held on **Thursday, May 30, 2019!** Events included the annual poster session, blue ribbon oral presentations, and keynote address, and a cocktail networking reception.

Interested in having your writing or photos published in The Scoop? Be a part of our next issue! Contact one of our editors to get involved.



Icahn School
of Medicine at
Mount
Sinai

The Scoop Spring 2019

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