Roger Detels

For just about as long as HIV/AIDS has been an issue in Southeast Asia, India and China, something has been particularly striking about the leaders of the programs to combat the epidemic in those regions: So many have trained at the UCLA School of Public Health under the tutelage of Dr. Roger Detels, professor of epidemiology and dean of the school from 1980 to 1985.

Since Detels received federal funding to establish the UCLA/Fogarty AIDS International Training and Research Program in 1988, nearly 150 health professionals, most of them from developing Asian nations, have come to the school for master’s- and doctoral-level education. Trainees learn epidemiologic techniques and research methods that prepare them to return to leadership positions at home. And lead they have: Graduates have gone on to become ministers of health, to head AIDS and other disease surveillance programs, and to conduct critical research – often collaborating with Detels. Through his connections, Detels has consulted with numerous government and public health officials in these countries over the years – and his network of graduates in high places has served as an invaluable resource for UCLA faculty colleagues.

It was in Asia that Detels, while training to become a physician, was first drawn to public health. As a third-year medical student he spent six months at the Naval Medical Research Unit in Taiwan. “That experience made me realize that approaching one patient at a time wasn’t the way to make the biggest impact on health,” he says.

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He joined the school’s faculty in 1971 and had been making important discoveries showing the long-term effects of exposure to Los Angeles air pollution and a genetic susceptibility to multiple sclerosis when, in 1981, a UCLA physician, Dr. Michael Gottlieb, wrote the first report of an immune deficiency disorder affecting gay men. “I realized this was a model I could study through a cohort approach because we knew who was at risk for getting the disease and it had a very high incidence,” Detels says.

He began recruiting students from UCLA’s Gay and Lesbian Association as volunteers for a study in which they would anonymously respond to a series of questions and donate blood specimens. By 1983 Detels had enough data to successfully apply to the National Institutes of Health. UCLA and three other universities became the Multicenter AIDS Cohort (MACS), the first study to examine the natural history of AIDS. Twenty-eight years later, Detels continues to run the UCLA site; in that time MACS has followed more than 6,000 volunteer participants and published more than 1,200 papers, contributing pivotal insights on transmission, immune response, treatment, and genetic factors that, among other benefits, are integral to current efforts to develop a vaccine.

Detels is also the senior editor of the Oxford Textbook of Public Health, considered the ultimate resource for public health. The fifth edition of the ambitious undertaking was released in 2009, and a sixth is in the works. While the first two volumes focused primarily on the developed world, Detels takes pride in having brought a global perspective to the most recent editions.

Global health has been a major priority for the school over much of the last decade, and it could be argued that no one embodies that focus more than Detels and his international network of current and former students. When he isn’t visiting his former protégés for professional collaborations, Detels is in constant email contact. “It’s like having a large family,” he says. “I’ve met amazing, highly committed individuals. To help them develop as trainees and then to see them walk into leadership positions in their home countries and make a difference has been fantastically rewarding.”