

## Alumna Spotlight

**Nilda Chong, M.D., M.P.H., Dr.P.H. '00**

*Early in her career, Nilda Chong, M.D., M.P.H., Dr.P.H. '00, worked as a medical intern in the tropical rain forests of Latin America. Born to a Latina/Spanish/Italian mother and a Chinese father and raised in Panama, she was no stranger to a multicultural environment. She was, however, unfamiliar with the health beliefs and practices of people living in the heart of the jungle, and she was confronted daily with cultural differences that challenged her biases and assumptions about health care delivery. The experience of treating patients in those villages changed her life forever. "It was the beginning of my passion for cross-cultural communication that sparked a burning desire to enhance my cultural awareness and sensitivity," she says.*

As director of the Institute for Culturally Competent Care for Kaiser Permanente, Chong heads the only institute within a health care organization that is dedicated to ensuring that members' cultural values are considered and respected. The institute supports Kaiser Permanente's Centers of Excellence in Culturally Competent Care. Each center focuses on health issues that significantly affect a specific population highly represented in the local membership. The center in West Los Angeles focuses on conditions prevalent among African Americans, while the center in Colorado focuses on Latino health issues. Four other centers focus on the Armenian population, women's health, persons with disabilities, and linguistic services, and still more are in the planning stages. "We look at culture from a broad perspective," says Chong. "It's not only about race and ethnicity. Culture is also about social and religious groups. And, culturally competent care is about everyone!" she adds.

In 2002, Intercultural Press published Chong's first book, *The Latino Patient: A Cultural Guide for Health Care Providers*, which explores Latino health status, cultural values and effective communication strategies. Although she conceived the essence of the book more than 20 years earlier in the tropical rain forest, her studies at Berkeley helped bring it to life. She explains, "When I was working on my dissertation, Merry Minkler, who was my adviser, would cross out huge chunks of text and she would write in the margin, 'This is not for the dissertation. This is for a book.' So I saved all those pages, and I saved all my lit searches, and the day I finished my dissertation, I sat down and started working on the book." She is currently working on a second book and a novel; both are about the Latino culture.

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Says Chong, "When I graduated from Berkeley, I made a personal commitment to give back to the school. I truly believe that I would not be where I am today if not for the School of Public Health. Alumni are in a unique position to help the school," she says, "because we can open doors for current students. We can establish channels so that students can have access to health care organizations and can explore opportunities in the health care arena."



Nilda Chong

She is actively involved with the School of Public Health's Center for Public Health Practice, exploring opportunities for collaboration such as placing students in internships at Kaiser Permanente. "I believe that if we can establish an effective link with the School of Public Health, students will benefit greatly and the Institute will have the opportunity to recruit outstanding public health professionals. We are very interested in getting the best of the best."

Chong believes that as the makeup of the nation's population becomes more diverse, the school's emerging leadership on issues of racial and ethnic health disparities will become even more critical. She says, "I'm very pleased to see that our school is looking at diversity and culturally competent care and that our school is very committed to facing the challenges of our nation's changing demographic profile." 🍷

— Michael S. Broder