



# Standing up for the people’s health: the rainbow approach to fighting for health justice

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## Preface from the editor

Every year, the American Public Health Association (APHA) honors excellence in public health leadership and innovation. During APHA’s 2023 Annual Meeting, this year’s awards was presented to Nancy Krieger, PhD, MS, professor of social epidemiology, American Cancer Society Clinical Research Professor at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. She received the *2023 Sedgwick Memorial Medal for Distinguished Service in Public Health* for her activism and research surrounding health equity and social science. Widely published, Krieger is known for her study of the social determinants of health—how where one is born, lives and works affect their well-being—and how structural racism affects health, especially since the onset of COVID-19. She continues to educate public health professionals on how social inequality affects health as the co-founder and chair of APHA’s Spirit of 1848 Caucus.

Dr. Krieger also received the *Journal of Public Health Policy* Best Paper Award for her paper entitled “Climate crisis, health equity, and democratic governance: the need to act together.” In this paper, she emphasized the dire impacts of the climate crisis on people’s health, planetary health, and health equity. She called health professionals, organizations, and institutions to encourage civic engagement by enforcing “voter registration, being counted in the 2020 Census, countering partisan gerrymandering, and helping to build strong coalitions addressing profound links between climate change, health equity, and democratic governance” [1].

The *JPHP* has a long tradition of working together with national and international organizations to promote best practices in public health and public health policy. Over the years, the Journal has brought attention to critical issues of public health, including smoking hazards, occupational exposures to pesticides and asbestos, health effects of poor nutrition, climate change, and military conflicts. With the *JPHP* Paper of the Year Award, we recognize excellence in advancing public

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health policy research and practice through written scholarship. We invited Dr. Krieger to share with JPHP readers her remarks delivered at the APHA in November 2023 (here is the link to the video: <https://youtu.be/4Qx7iBnEmxo>).

## Author's Note:

*I delivered these remarks when awarded the American Public Health Association's Sedgwick Memorial Medal at the 2023 meeting of the American Public Health Association (APHA) [2]. As stated by APHA, the Sedgwick Memorial Medal is "APHA's oldest and most prestigious award" and "was first awarded by APHA for distinguished service and advancement of public health knowledge and practice in 1929" [3].*

**Sedgwick Memorial Medal address** Thank you. Recognizing that I stand on Indigenous land, I am deeply honored to be here today, among all of you & the many working hard for health justice—which this deeply troubled world needs more than ever. Never again means never again, for everyone; heinous war crimes are heinous war crimes, no matter who commits them; dispossession and discrimination are ruinous, as is despoilation of our wondrous planet. The people's health demands better.

This award is not about me, but what I and so many of you stand for and fight for, day in, day out. This stance is core to our Spirit of 1848 Caucus, affiliated with APHA, which I co-founded in 1994 and still chair [4]—whose name honors and builds on the 1st ever national public health acts passed that year, in the UK, alongside global organizing for workers' and peasants' rights, abolition of slavery, workers' and women's suffrage, anti-colonial struggles, and democratic & socialist revolutions across Europe, all intimately tied to the fight for health justice. Such a stance is at the heart of my empirical and theoretical work on social justice and the people's health.

So in that spirit, in my 3 min, let me first ask all of you for a moment of silence, recognizing the current carnage that as of today (November 13, 2023) horrifically has killed nearly 11,300 Palestinians, nearly half children, and 1200 Israeli civilians, with hospitals and health care workers in Gaza now under attack [PAUSE]. Next, please STAND if you: (1) are on our Spirit of 1848 Coordinating Committee; (2) subscribe to our listserv; and/or (3) work for health justice, whether in relation to:

- Racial justice and economic justice.
- Workers' health and safety and occupational justice.
- LGBTQIA and health.
- Harm reduction and decarceration.
- Disability rights.
- Indigenous rights and sovereignty.
- Environmental justice.
- Climate justice.



- Reproductive justice.
- Health care as a human right, and health and human rights more broadly.
- Voting rights and electoral justice.
- Generating evidence and action for health justice.

Look at you. Look at us. Together, we stand for these deep, intertwined, reality-based positions that are at the heart of the work for public health. Together, we stand against threats to health equity, include minority rule of any kind of market or religious fundamentalism that protects and imposes the will of a minority on all. Of course, public health, like any other field, has its uglier sides, including historical and current support for eugenics, scientific racism, and more—but such views have never been unopposed. We stand together instead, for health justice, like the rainbow that we are, each stripe with its distinct issues and challenges, and at the same time part of a whole that is intrinsically connected.

Back in 1989, I was honored with the APHA Jay S. Drotman memorial award, building on my early work for health justice, as tied to Rainbow Coalition and more [5]. Hence, coming back full circle, it's apt to close with what I said back then, as included in an essay I published in 1990 “On Becoming a Public Health Professional: Reflections on Democracy, Leadership, and Accountability” [6]:

“It is our responsibility, as public health professionals at once expert and partisan, to help build a world in which health truly can exist for all—a world free of discrimination and oppression, free of poverty and underdevelopment, free of warfare and the threat of nuclear and environmental destruction, a world in which we all can live, love, work and die with our dignity intact and our humanity cherished.”

I suspect Dolly Parton might agree [2]. And so: thank you—to all whom I have been fortunate to work with, learn from, and grow with these many years in our work across generations for health justice—and: ONWARDS!

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** As sole author, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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