

## FINAL WORD ↗ BY A. BARTON HINKLE

## Public Health Is Everywhere

Shortly before this fall's election, *New Yorker* executive editor Michael Luo wondered, "Should Political Violence Be Addressed Like a Threat to Public Health?" If you're wondering what public health has to do with political violence, you're not following the zeitgeist. For many years now, treating various social and political issues like public health problems has been all the rage. People have suggested that a public health approach be applied to issues such as climate change, racism, gun violence, police transparency (or the lack of it), and even fast-food marketing.

Why the impulse to treat policy questions like the Plague? According to Luo, "The premise is tantalizingly straightforward: utilize scientific data to identify risk factors and the most vulnerable populations and adopt multipronged solutions to stop problems before they arise." Put another way, the appeal is that the public health approach takes complex issues and makes them simple as pie—or at least a pie chart.

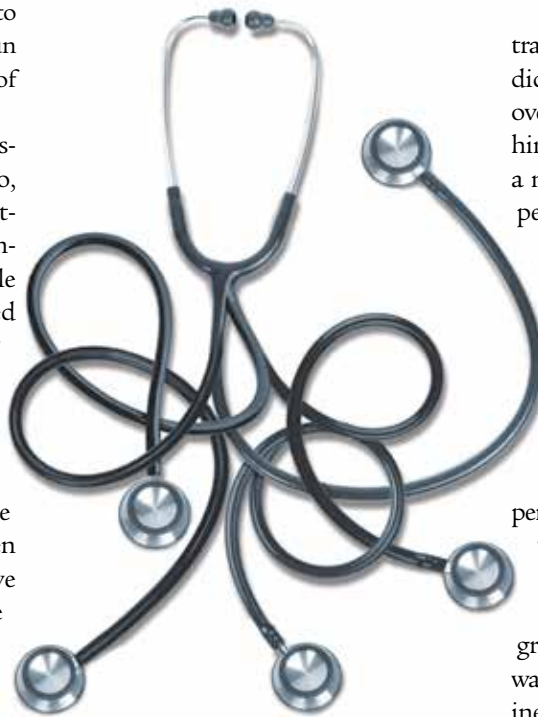
But is it really all that simple? Before we replace our elected officials with men and women in lab coats, perhaps we should unpack some of the possible shortcomings.

For starters, it's not immediately obvious that the analogy—however "tantalizingly straightforward" it might be—holds. Does climate change—or political violence, or racism—truly resemble a contagion like cholera or COVID? If so, how do we find Patient Zero? What are the vectors of transmission? How do you inoculate against the pathogen?

The public health approach also lacks a limiting principle. If something can be said to affect public health, even indirectly, then the assumption seems to be that government should intervene. But just

about anything can be said to affect public health, so just about anything might be subject to government intervention.

Take racism. One argument goes that racism deprives its victims of equal educational and economic opportunities, leading to wealth inequality. That, in turn, leads to disparities in health outcomes among demographic groups, and that is why racism is a public health problem. Fair enough,



but if we apply similar logic elsewhere, what doesn't affect public health? And therefore, what isn't a public health problem?

National Public Radio, for example, reported recently that political "polarization can lead to isolation, stress, and anger. And researchers have found the more distant a person feels from the political norm in their state, the worse their reported health." So, are shifting political norms a public health problem? If so, what's the cure?

What about, say, excessive taxation? It limits people's ability to afford gym mem-

berships and buy healthy foods. This makes big government a public health problem, too. So, to advance the general welfare, we should cut taxes. Who's with me?

Another flaw in the public health approach is that it moves the locus of moral control outside the individual. Gun violence, for example, is largely a function of individuals making poor choices about how to resolve conflict. But addressing the human propensity to make poor choices is a ticklish proposition indeed. It is much easier to blame gun violence on "the gun lobby" and "easy access to guns" and to apply measures meant to tackle those ostensible pathogens.

To do so, however, is to tell the perpetrator of crime that he is really a *victim*. He didn't fly into a rage and kill a stranger over a traffic dispute; he was struck down himself by a curious sort of illness. That's a message unlikely to incentivize better personal choices.

And this gets to another problem with the public health approach: It is meant to be preventive. (As Luo puts it, "If we simply wait for the disease to strike, it may already be too late.") The trouble is that preventive measures run up against individual rights and simple notions of justice. A waiting period to purchase a gun may prevent some violent person somewhere from killing. But its mechanism—prior restraint—definitely infringes on the rights of a great many people who are not violent, in a way we would not tolerate elsewhere. (Imagine imposing a 48-hour embargo on all news articles in the hope of containing the minuscule fraction that might be libelous.)

In his *New Yorker* piece, Luo discusses a researcher who assigned a team to look into "the possibility that people might resort to violence to achieve their political ends." That's ironic given that many of the measures suggested for solving social ills entail government intervention. Government, after all, works by exercising the threat of force (and sometimes by force itself). If researchers would like to limit political violence, they might begin by shrinking the source of so much of it. **R**