

Researcher tapped for cellphone-based health survey project

December 10 2015, by David J. Hill

When a person dies in a developed nation, more often than not the cause of death is known and recorded. But that's not the case in many low- and middle-income countries around the world. This lack of information makes it difficult for governments, public health leaders and aid organizations to prioritize funding and resources that can ultimately save lives.

Bloomberg Philanthropies' Data for Health initiative seeks to change that. And a University at Buffalo researcher who helped lead the world's largest tobacco-surveillance study has been tapped to serve as a consultant on the project.

Gary Giovino, PhD, professor and chair of the Department of Community Health and Health Behavior in UB's School of Public Health and Health Professions, is facilitating the development of the Data for Health non-communicable disease risk factor mobile phone survey.

The survey will be delivered to cellphone users in as many as 20 countries. In addition to basic demographic information, the survey will ask participants about their diet, exercise and use of tobacco and alcohol. Scientists currently know very little about these risk factors in the developing world.

"When people think about global [health](#), they often think of infectious or communicable disease. What they forget is that in all but the poorest countries in the world, [non-communicable diseases](#) like heart attack and

diabetes kill more people than infectious diseases," said Giovino, adding that four main factors—tobacco use, unhealthy diet, [excessive alcohol consumption](#) and physical inactivity—are the biggest culprits.

The hope is that better data will allow researchers to target and prevent chronic diseases caused by everyday behaviors, such as smoking and poor diet. WHO estimates that 65 percent of all deaths worldwide—35 million annually—go unrecorded, meaning the cause of death is undocumented.

"Data for Health aims to document the upstream causes," Giovino said. "This is going to be very interesting and a really good way to collect data. In some countries, there are more mobile phones than people."

Giovino was chosen to facilitate development of the D4H questionnaire based on his past experience as chief of the epidemiology branch of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Office on Smoking and Health, and because he did similar work for the Global Adult Tobacco Survey. His 2012 publication in *Lancet*, with colleagues from around the world, reported on tobacco-use behaviors based on surveys of more than 435,000 respondents representing 3 billion people from 16 countries.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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