

# **At the Essence of Health: Health Messages Portrayed to Black Women in *Essence* Magazine**

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## **Introduction**

### **Statement of the Problem**

This study examines the public health messages contained in *Essence* magazine over 10 years (2001-2010). *Essence* is a print magazine that touches on health and relationships; personal finance and careers; arts and entertainment; world news; food; fitness; fashion; and beauty, as well as the personal challenges and achievements of African American women (*Essence* magazine, 2011). In terms of health, the top five causes of death in African American women in 2006 were heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes and kidney disease (Centers for Disease Control, 2010). As a culture that is constantly changing both socially and medically, the media is becoming a principal source of health-related information for African Americans. In a study of African American women, the majority of women listed mass media as a crucial source of information regarding breast cancer and diabetes, as opposed to physician opinion, and print media was utilized three times more frequently than electronic media (Sadler, 2005). Because of Black women's dependence on media information and the importance of health-related messages in magazines, the trends in health messages targeting Black women from 2001-2010 within a popular media source noteworthy.

### **Literature Review**

Prevention is a key process in every walk of life and across every group of people. Particularly important is the health of Black women and the rate of progression that this group has experienced in terms of health over the years. Three particular levels of prevention are utilized during the process. The first is primary prevention, which is used before a person develops a disease. Its primary endeavor is to prevent the disease from developing. As a result of primary prevention, incidence and prevalence are often reduced. The next level is secondary prevention, which is used after the disease has settled in but goes unnoticed in the eyes of the patient. The objective of secondary prevention is to find and treat the disease early. The last level

is tertiary prevention, which targets patients who already have a disease. The goals of tertiary prevention are to: prevent damage and pain from the disease, slow the progress of a disease, prevent a disease from causing other problems, provide better care to people with the disease, and make people with the disease healthy again and able to do what they used to do (Centers for Disease Control, 2004).

When applied to Black women's health and their rates of morbidity, primary levels of prevention are essential in lowering the incidence rates of this group. However, because level of care varies from person to person, primary and sometimes secondary levels of prevention are often not utilized and fall short of what is needed in this population.

Print media such as magazines often are a primary source of health information for men and women of different backgrounds. Often, a message is relayed too quickly and interpretations diverge across various means of communication. With that said, the exploration of health messages across magazine genres can create an array of health information that can vary from one extreme to the next. In order to explore this topic in depth, this literature review will provide an overview of what various studies report about magazine messages for both men and women, the factors that influence articles, and the methods that can be used to better relay those messages to readers.

One of the most vital pieces to a magazine is the cover, and within the cover is a message that the magazine is attempting to communicate. However, drastic differences in conveyances occur between both men's and women's magazines. A study focused particularly on gendered messages in 21 popular men's and women's magazines discovered that 78% of women's magazines contained messages in regard to bodily appearance, whereas none of the men's magazines grazed the subject. Out of the women's magazines covers, 25% mentioned articles with contradictory messages on dietary habits and weight loss (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971). Men's magazines generally focused more on providing entertainment and improving quality of life via activities, hobbies, and knowledge (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971). Because of this divide consequences found in society likely revolve around gender norms and expectations, which ultimately lead to stereotyping (Malkin, Wornian, & Chrisler, 1999) ; (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971). Often, magazines force women into particular roles that are/were traditionally used in the U.S. For example, women tend to work more in domestic positions than outside of the home. Also, a woman is "happier" when completing household tasks and serving as the caretaker of the family (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971).

More specifically, African American magazines have created an even greater divide with stereotypes and messages throughout the years. Predominantly African American magazines tend to gravitate more toward the trends of White culture in America. The body type that has progressively grown more desirable in White culture has become thinner throughout the decades, which has ultimately influenced many minority cultures. In *Playboy* magazine, the evidence is even more apparent in seeing the changes of body type over the course of its history. Alongside *Playboy*, the same trends can be found in magazines such as *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan*. That particular research is important to fully comprehend the meaning behind body esteem (Dawson-Andoh, Gray, Soto, & Parker, 2010). African American women in general feel very positive about their bodies and demonstrate overall greater confidence (Dr. Jennifer Graham, BBH 310-Spring 2010).

Inside these magazines, a continuation of the journey of health is explored in more detail. Women’s magazines, in general, contain food advertisements no matter what the target audience may be. The reason being is that food is essential to human beings and is commonly used as a means of sociability, kindness, and warmth (Madden & Chamberlain, 2004). Food advertisements also blend into the expectation of women as primary chefs of households (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971). However, many magazines tend to create a moral discourse in dietary practices related to guilt. Advertisements and articles gravitate toward the consequences of self-indulgence which can ultimately become problematic. Overall, the issue boils down to the morality of eating healthy and creating a balanced diet for the body. In women’s magazines those roadblocks become more evident and burdensome by allowing the reader to question the ethical values in perilous dieting habits.

Due to the power of social marketing and thus mass media, relevant sources need to relay the proper information to their target audiences. As related to African American women, a study on African American magazines found that Black faces were depicted more in negative health-related ads. In mainstream magazines, White faces were rarely depicted in positive health-related advertisements (Sadler, 2005).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The current study employs two guiding theories. First, the health belief model describes personal factors that attribute to a person’s likelihood of changing behavior. Second, the prevention marketing model describes how behavior change can occur through media sources.

#### **Health Belief Model**

The health belief model consists of six concepts that are described in Table I.

**Table I**

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Application</b>
<b>Perceived Susceptibility</b>	One's opinion of chances of contracting a condition.	Define population(s) at risk; risk levels; personalize risk based on a person's features or behavior; heighten perceived susceptibility if too low.
<b>Perceived Severity</b>	One's opinion of how serious a condition is and its consequences.	Specify consequences of the risk and the condition.
<b>Perceived Benefits</b>	One's belief in the efficacy of the advised action to reduce risk or seriousness of impact.	Define action to take; how, where, when; clarify the positive effects to be expected.
<b>Perceived Barriers</b>	One's opinion of the tangible and psychological costs of the advised action.	Identify and reduce barriers through reassurance, incentives, assistance.
<b>Cues to</b>	Strategies to activate	Provide how-to information, promote

<b>Action</b>	"readiness."	awareness, reminders.
<b>Self-Efficacy</b>	Confidence in one's ability to take action	Provide training, guidance in performing action.

Table from "Theory at a Glance: A Guide for Health Promotion Practice" (1997)

In this study, we work under the premise that print media messages may bring to attention perceived risk and benefits, and may encourage Black women to contemplate perceived barriers, and may provide ideas about cues to action.

### **Prevention Marketing Model**

Prevention marketing is an example of a theoretical framework that incorporates a multilevel approach in working with community-based, health-related behaviors. Originally developed in response to the epidemic of American youth contracting the HIV virus, The Centers for Disease Control adopted prevention marketing in 1993 (Lao & Brookmeyer, 1995). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) is the federal agency responsible for disease prevention and health promotion in the United States. For lack of a more appropriate theoretical framework, the CDC created the overall framework coined prevention marketing. It laid the foundation for national prevention communication activities and demonstrations projects at the time (Ogden et al., 1996).

Within the design of prevention marketing are varying principles derived from three different disciplines that specifically target levels of health influences. Behavioral science, social marketing and community development are the three facets that comprise social marketing, and ultimately affect a target audience. Those three fields have historically been applied to public health issues over time, including that of magazine articles and advertisements. Behavioral science is a term that is utilized when describing analyses of multiple disciplines, which include but are not limited to psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Typical questions revolved around who is doing what, with whom, where, when, how, and how often. Social marketing involves the incorporation of commercial marketing principles and techniques in the process of attaining goals that are socially advantageous. In *Essence*, articles and advertisements frequently revolve around current trends in food, health, employment, etc. that render socially advantageous for its readers. Its process consists of a multistage strategic planning and implementation process that characteristically has five steps. Lastly, community development encompasses interventions at the community level that impact community-based organizations and work to resolve community problems. Being a Black woman's magazine, a sense of community is a large benefactor in producing the magazine as a resource for women of color (Kennedy & Crosby, 2002).

Print magazines are often a means for consumers and patients to explore all three realms of the prevention marketing model. In behavioral science, studies printed in journals and magazines offer insight on the latest studies and potential changes in regulations, pharmaceuticals, and treatments. Social marketing is perhaps the most popular in terms of print magazines because of its social aims and goals. With print magazines overall, social marketing is the most widely used (Kennedy & Crosby, 2002). Lastly, community action advertisements and promotions are predominantly used in magazines to promote secondary and additional information on certain subjects.

The Health Belief Model and Prevention Marketing Model will both be used in the analysis of *Essence* magazine health articles from 2000-2001. More specifically, the Health Belief Model will be used to extract information in each article by determining what levels of the model each article addresses. The levels will be recorded in an overall extraction form to compare the various articles throughout the years. The elements of Prevention Marketing Model will also be used in the extraction form to determine which of the three elements each article addresses. However, in some cases, articles may target more than one element of the Prevention Marketing Model.

With the data extracted from the models applied to each of the theories, an overall comparison can be established as related to where *Essence* magazine is lacking and where its strong suits are in messages to Black women.

### **Methodology**

#### **Data and materials:**

*Essence* magazine was first published in 1970 exclusively for African American women. With its slogan being “Where Black Women Come First,” the magazine focuses on news, entertainment, and motivational monthly pieces. It has become one the largest labels and magazines in the lives of African American women to the point of affecting its readers’ lives personally, professionally, intellectually and spiritually. Since its inception, it has continued to expand upon topic areas in African American women’s lives, including career and finance, health and lifestyle, and fashion and beauty; career and finance; health; and lifestyle. Originally starting with a readership of 50,000 in May of 1970, *Essence* now boasts a monthly circulation of 1,050,000 and a readership of 8.5 million (Essence Communications Inc. , 2011).

#### **Data collection procedures:**

Health message trends were studied by examining the MINDBODY and later HEALTH section of every *Essence* magazine between 2001-2010. The MINDBODY and HEALTH sections highlight various aspects of health within each month including sexual, physical, and mental health. In each month of *Essence* a MINDBODY section or HEALTH section was listed in the table of contents. Every article was categorized into different topics on the form: sexual health, physical health, aging, medicine, spiritual health, and mental health are the six categories. Extensive effort was made to retrieve every article. However, some issues did not included MINDBODY or HEALTH sections while other articles were not reproduced on the database website.

With each article examined, data was recorded on an extraction form created to interpret which data corresponded to the utilized models. Both the Health Belief Model and the Preventative Marketing Model were used to categorize what levels of each were addressed in the articles. In addition, the level of prevention was indicated in order to determine around which prevention level the article revolved.

#### Elements of Extraction:

- 1) Year/Month: Every magazine from 2001-2010 was utilized for data interpretation. The year and month were tracked in order to compare the differences in the objectives from month to month and throughout the decade.
- 2) Title: The title of each article was recorded in the extraction form to distinguish among the articles of each month.
- 3) Category: Every article was categorized into one of six categories in regard to its overall messages: sexual health (SH), physical health (PH), aging (A), medicine (M), spiritual health (SPH), and mental health (MH).
- 4) Author: The author(s) of each article was/were noted to determine if there were particular patterns existed in writing.
- 5) Level of Prevention: With each *Essence* article, the level of prevention (LOP) was used to identify what particular audiences were targeted. The primary, secondary and tertiary levels of prevention are used to determine disease prevention (Center for Disease Control, 2004).
- 6) Health Belief Model: The Health Belief Model (HBM) was used for every article in determining how it addressed perceive susceptibility, perceived severity, perceived benefits, perceived barriers, cues to action, and/or self-efficacy.
- 7) Prevention Marketing Approach: The Prevention Marketing Approach (PMA) identified if one or more of the three elements of the approach were embedded in each article's objective. The three elements include behavioral marketing, social science, and community development.

With all of the data formed together, the patterns of health messages will be tracked over the 10-year period.

#### Analytic Approach:

Content analysis will be employed to identify types of health messages, the level of prevention, and the message's relation to potential behavior change. Additionally, I will assess the frequency of each category of health message and whether the message addresses the top 10 causes of morbidity and mortality among black women according to Healthy People 2010.

#### **Results**

In order to analyze the research content, I analyzed each of the magazine's articles from 2001-2010 by applying the Prevention Marketing Model, Health Belief Model and goals of Healthy People 2010 to content of all 408 articles. Table 2 below lists the title of each section to which the articles belong and the changes over time.

**Table II**

Month/Year Beginning	Month/Year End	Title of Section
January 2001	April 2003	MINDBODY
May 2003	September 2005	HEALTH
October 2005	May 2008	BODY&SOUL
June 2008	March 2009	Healthy Living
April 2009	December 2010	BODY&SPIRIT

Each of the sections contained articles pertaining to health in various forms. However, some study articles that focused on specific questions or personal issues that could not be categorized accordingly were excluded. Between the years 2001 and 2004, the “Between Us” and “Ask Iyanla” articles were excluded as a result of their content. In addition, the “How She Does It” articles from years 2009-2010 were excluded as a result of their content as well. Extensive efforts were also made to obtain every article needed from the 10-year time frame. Some magazines did not contain the sections desired and some articles were decipherable for extraction.

### **Categorization**

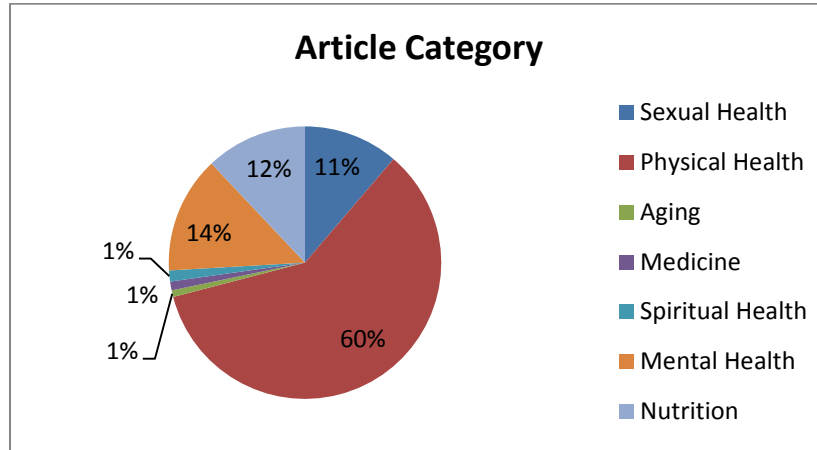
Each article extracted was categorized into one of seven categories based off of its messages: sexual health, physical health, mental health, spiritual health, mental health, nutrition, and aging. Each of the categorizations contained their own core messages. A sample is listed below:

1. Sexual health- Sexual health and happiness is a shared concern among the Black female community. Questions that often cause embarrassment should be addressed monthly. In January of 2006, the article titled “Your sex life” focused on sex toys and achieving an orgasm with you partner.
2. Physical health- Exercise in various forms on a daily basis is important to Black women’s everyday health.
3. Mental Health- Many warning signs of mental illnesses and struggles often go unrecognized in the Black community.
4. Nutrition- Quick and healthy meals can be very useful with hectic schedules. Learning how to prepare well-balanced meals is a also a means of preventing certain diseases. In July of 2003, the article titled “What you see is what you eat” provided healthy recipes and tips for weight loss via daily eating habits.

The majority of the articles (60%) addressed issues concerning physical health. Each magazine from 2002-2010 typically started each health section with an article on physical fitness and specific exercises to improve a woman’s physique. However, many articles addressed risks of diseases, methods of prevention, and awareness related to Black women’s physical health. Obesity steadily became an even more common article topic toward the later portion of the decade, with articles specifically aimed at overweight women of color.

Sexual health and nutrition became of growing popularity as the health sections expanded over time. In 2009, nearly every magazine contained “Sexual Health” and “Healthy Food Fast” sections. The focus of the “Sexual Health” section was generally to promote awareness of sexual health issues related to Black women such as HIV, fibroids, and contraception. The “Healthy Food Fast” section provided quick and healthy recipes for Black women on-the-go, as well as relative information on how food shapes our overall health. Figure I breaks down the percentage frequency of each category.

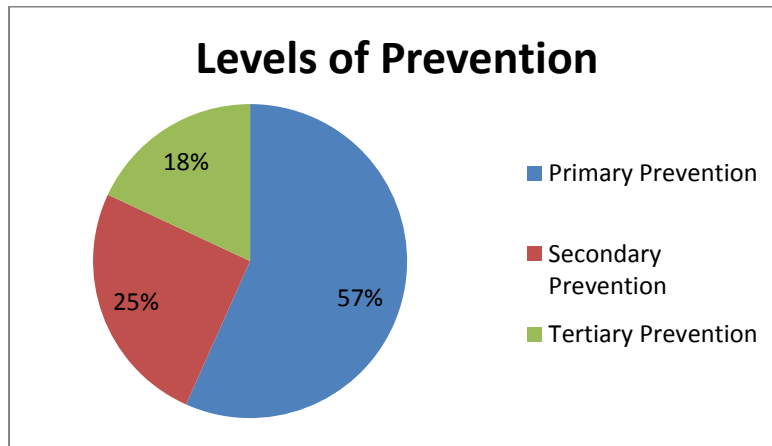
**Figure I**



**Levels of Prevention**

The level of prevention was used in the extraction form to determine what level each article addressed, be it primary, secondary, or tertiary. More than half of the articles addressed primary levels of prevention, meaning before a disease or condition has set in and providing guidance in preventing onset. An example of an article that addresses all three levels of prevention is “Triple Threat” from the October 2008 issue of Essence. The article touches on the stages of breast cancer and what Black women need to know in order to take action. Figure II depicts the percentage breakdown of prevention level focuses.

**Figure II**

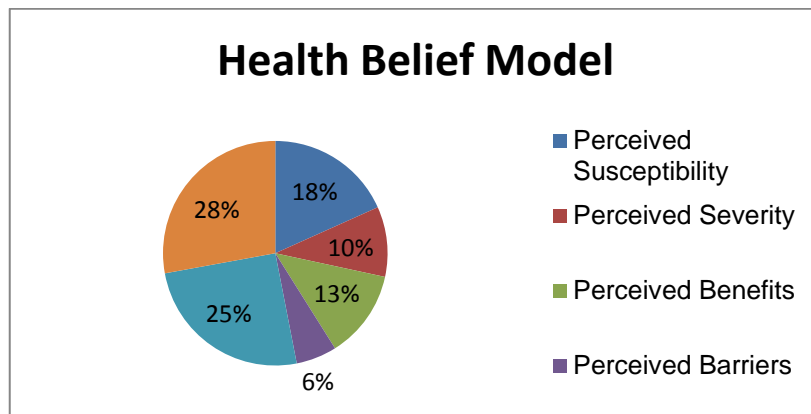




### Health Belief Model

Each of the six elements of the Health Belief Model was applied to the magazine articles. Many articles contained more than one element, while others possessed only one. Perceived susceptibility articles addressed not only Black women, but Black women who fit the articles target audience; for example, topics such as stress, HPV, and cancer were addressed. Perceived severity articles addressed consequences and risks associated with the topic of concern. Perceived benefits, Cues to Action and Self-Efficacy articles typically were grouped in providing the reader with direction and clarity. Perceived barriers concentrated on reassurance and guidance in order to keep the reader from straying away from the topic or information. Figure III breaks down the percentage of articles utilizing the elements of the Health Belief Model.

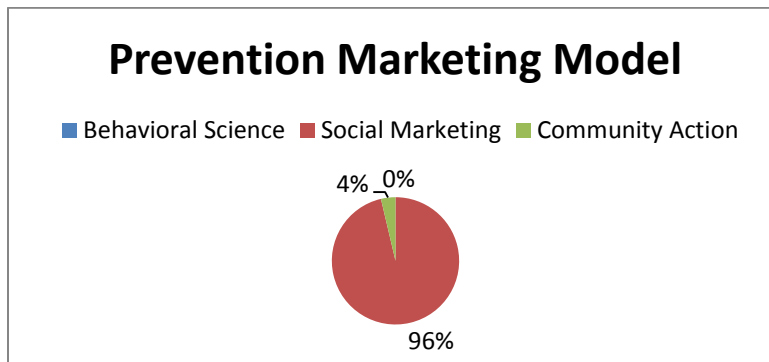
**Figure III**



### Prevention Marketing Model

The most frequently utilized element of the prevention marketing model was Social Marketing. Being that the magazine is utilized for informational and educational purposes rather than research, no articles addressed Behavioral Sciences. Within some articles and coupled with Social Marketing, were Community Action measures. However, 15 articles out of the 408 concerned Community Action. Figure IV breaks down the percentage of articles related to the prevention marketing model.

**Figure IV**



### Healthy People 2010

The two goals of Healthy People 2010 are as follows:

1. The first goal of *Healthy People 2010* is to help individuals of all ages to increase life expectancy and improve quality of life.
2. The second goal of *Healthy People 2010* is to help the U.S. eliminate health disparities among different segments of the population.

It is also noteworthy that all of the articles as a whole work to achieve these two goals. By demonstration of the effectiveness of the two models, each health section clearly works to increase life expectancy, improve quality of life and eliminate health disparities specifically concerning Black women. Disparities included in *Essence* from 2001-2010 included obesity, HIV, and cancer.

### Discussion

The study on health messages in *Essence* magazine from 2001-2010 provided a succinct pattern of information related to Black women's health. The purpose of the study was achieved through examining over 400 health articles from the magazine over a 10-year time period. Focuses on weight loss and nutrition became heavily documented toward the latter half of the decade. Sexual health was also a popular topic, but *Essence* did lack in the areas of HIV/AIDS and breast cancer specifically.

To my knowledge, previous studies have examined messages in a variety of magazines in terms of body image, health, and advertisements. Most popular to those studies are magazines and advertisements that target predominantly White audiences. However, with *Essence* magazine, a story was created that shaped the health of Black women over the course of 10 years. One of the most popular stories was that of nutrition and its importance to overall health. Madden and Chamberlain (2004) pointed out the essentiality of food to humans. *Essence* magazine took that concept to the next level and provided ways for women with fast-paced lives to continue their health dietary habits. By providing "5-minute recipes" for women on-the-go, the magazine's highlights opened doors for a wide range of nutritional educational strategies and essentially, weight management. In terms of nutritional competence, Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) examined the moral guilt of not eating healthy and the effects that it has on women's food habits related to binge dieting, eating disorders and weight loss. Contrary to popular research, *Essence* capitalized on the Self-Efficacy and Cues to Action constructs of the Health Belief Model by empowering Black women in their eating habits and restoring their confidence within themselves.

Throughout the course of the 10 years, health messages increased in importance, popularity, and diversity as whole. Beginning with the MINDBODY section in 2001, relationships and issues involving sex were of significant importance to the magazine in general. Steadily, weight and nutrition began to take control of the health sections and quickly became routine monthly topics. Coinciding with the obesity epidemic in America, specific weight loss and healthy cooking grew into common articles for *Essence*. Yet, of significant concern to the Black female community are breast cancer and HIV. Since reducing the risk of obesity thus decreases the risk of breast cancer, few articles focused on and specifically highlighted breast cancer in black women. As a population dying more frequently from the disease than any other group, that is of utmost concern and importance for *Essence* editors to consider when addressing

health issues over the next decade. In addition, HIV/AIDS was addressed but was often mixed in with related sexual health articles. Since Black women suffer from HIV/AIDS more often than any other group should be grounds for extensive article awareness with regards to all three levels of prevention (Centers for Disease Control, 2010).

The health messages in *Essence* provided Black women with a sense of responsibility and promoted pride in their health. The magazine as a whole aimed to heighten the self-esteem of Black women by providing resources to improve their lives. By allowing primary prevention to be so prevalent in its health articles, *Essence* provided preventative measures for the betterment of the Black community as a whole.

### *Limitations*

One of the most significant limitations of the study involved the target audience of *Essence*. As a whole, the magazine caters more toward women of middle and upper class. Frequently, articles or prevention methods may not be as accessible to Black women of lower class. In addition, many Black women may not use *Essence* magazine or magazines a primary source of health information.

Secondly, with increasing importance to the technological society, *Essence* could potentially be on the decline as a primary source of health information in comparison to the Internet and other electronic media. As more minorities are becoming adept and have access to electronic sources, many may not want to spend the money on a magazine but rather look up health information of significant concern.

### *Future Research*

For future research, it is vital that *Essence* needs to account for the top 10 causes of death associated with Black women in America. In doing so, a more solid framework of health messages can be accounted for in each issue. Also, each needs to stick to receiving the proper health information from professionals in the field who are up-to-date with trends of public health in the United States.

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