



## INTEGRATIVE MEDICINE SERVING THE UNDERSERVED AND VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

### Critical to Integrative Health Equity

The United Nations (U.N.) identifies health as a shared responsibility, involving equitable access to essential care. The World Health Organization (WHO), as the directing and coordinating authority for health within the U.N. system, is committed to global health development through the principle of equity, i.e., *access to life-saving or health-promoting interventions, with a priority given to health outcomes in poor, disadvantaged or vulnerable groups.*

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) characterizes underserved, vulnerable, and special needs populations as communities that include members of minority groups or individuals who have experienced health disparities.

#### Underserved, Vulnerable and Special Needs Populations in the U.S.

Latino populations • African American populations • AI/AN populations • Refugees • Individuals with limited English proficiency • Young adults and postsecondary graduating students who do not have coverage options • New mothers and women with children • Individuals with disabilities • Medicaid-eligible consumers who are not enrolled in coverage.

U.S. Dept of Health & Human Services



**Maria Chao**, DrPH, MPA, has been involved in identifying and addressing the barriers to integrative medicine for the underserved for the past 22 years. Dr. Chao is Associate Director for Health Equity and Diversity, and Associate Director of Research at the Osher Center for Integrative Health, University of California, San Francisco. In 2019, Dr. Chao and her research team demonstrated that group support, acupuncture, mindfulness, massage and gentle exercise may offer safe, extra relief to patients on prescription opioids. This research tracked the impact of a program for low-income, at-risk patients with chronic pain at Tom Waddell Urban Health Clinic, a flagship health care site for the homeless population in San Francisco where UCSF medical students are trained and mentored.

The UCSF Osher Center has a longtime commitment to integrative health equity, an emerging field focused on the application of integrative approaches to improving health among underserved and vulnerable populations. Part of the Osher Collaborative for Integrative Health, the Osher Center has maintained close ties to IM4US (Integrative Medicine for the Underserved) since its inception in 2009.



In 2021, the Osher Center launched the NIH-funded Integrative Health Equity and Applied Research (IHEAR) Summer Training Program, designed as an early career pathway to develop researchers focused on integrative health equity. *“Research is needed on integrative approaches and health outcomes among vulnerable and underserved populations, and we need to test models to improve access to integrative medicine in under-resourced settings,”* says Dr. Chao. This program is part of a multi-pronged strategy to bridge public health equity and integrative medicine through research, education and clinical practice, strengthened by thoughtful attention to workforce diversity.

As a member of the Academic Consortium’s Oversight Committee for the 2022 International Congress on Medicine & Health, May 23-26, Dr. Chao, and every member of this committee, is helping to ensure that this topic remains an important part of the conversation in integrative health. A plenary session, *Integrative Medicine and Health Equity for Underserved Communities*, will feature a panel of experts, including Drs. Paula Gardiner, Gunver Kienle, Sabrina N’Diaye and Shannon Zenk. The International Congress is a professional growth opportunity for students, trainees, and professionals from underrepresented backgrounds or historically marginalized groups. Complimentary registration to the 2022 Congress, will be awarded to applicants who are eligible for a [Diversity and Inclusion Scholarship](#). Deadline: **December 31**.

Dr. Chao says *“Integrative medicine has so much to offer and important opportunities for growth. Reaching our goals for integrative health equity calls for fostering strong relationships with community partners and being willing to disrupt the status quo. Self-reflecting and identifying where we have privilege is essential for learning how to best use our power to improve health for all.”*

*“We need to see everything we do in integrative medicine - education, research, workforce and patient care through the lens of equity, diversity and inclusion.”*

#### Advancing an Integrative Health Equity Program

1. Clinical readiness – Establish primary care, group-based models that improve access to integrative health. Consider location, language and opportunity in addition to workforce training.
2. Research – Ensure that research studies include diverse research participants. Develop interventions with people with lived experiences.
3. Education – Create pipelines for underrepresented populations and proactively reach out to them.
4. Champions – Find a cross-section of individuals dedicated and passionate about this direction and initiate a work group to communicate, motivate, test and implement health equity strategy.

**Whole Health in the States (WHITS)** Initiative, a program of the Academic Consortium, is a coalition of state-level collaboratives that use a multi-stakeholder approach to solve a range of problems that states face in providing whole person care to medically underserved patients. The inaugural program area works to create state-based consensus and implementation strategies that increase access to and utilization of evidence-based nonpharmacologic treatments while providing high quality, comprehensive pain care for underserved populations. The WHITS Initiative, with foundational funding from The David and Lura Lovell Foundation, supports efforts in six pilot states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Illinois, Oregon, Vermont) and Washington, DC.

**Note:** The project welcomes the opportunity to expand to more states, improving comprehensive pain care, expanding to more health conditions and reducing provider burn out by transforming health care delivery barriers.

[Learn More](#)

## RESOURCES

- [Maria.Chao@ucsf.edu](mailto:Maria.Chao@ucsf.edu)
- [Integrative Medicine and the Imperative for Health Justice](#)
- [Integrative Health Equity and Applied Research \(IHEAR\) Summer Training Program](#)
- [Patient-Reported Outcomes of an Integrative Pain Management Program Implemented in a Primary Care Safety Net Clinic](#)
- [2022 International Congress Plenary - Integrative Medicine & Health Equity for Underserved Communities](#)
- [IM4US – Conference, Resources and More](#)
- [International Congress Diversity and Inclusion Scholarship](#)



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