



Profile

Rachel Nugent: global health economist making NCDs count

Women make up most of the global health workforce yet occupy less than a quarter of the most influential leadership positions. Rachel Nugent, Vice President of Global Non-communicable Diseases (NCDs) at RTI International based in Washington DC, USA, and Affiliate Associate Professor of Global Health at the University of Washington in Seattle, WA, USA is one of those rare few. She's calling for a sea change in the way we finance efforts to control and manage NCDs. "The investment case has been out there for other areas of global health—for vaccines, child and maternal health, HIV/AIDS. We didn't have that for NCDs", says Nugent when I ask her about the *Lancet* Taskforce on NCDs and economics, which she co-led with Robert Beaglehole. The Taskforce's economic analysis is the "big missing piece", she thinks. "It reveals that investment in NCDs is very worthwhile for countries as well as globally." The other strong messages are about poverty. "Fiscal policies to prevent NCDs are not regressive and don't necessarily hurt the poor", she says. "That's a gamechanger for understanding how economic policies can contribute to NCD prevention. It will give the new global Task Force on Fiscal Policy for Health a very strong evidence base for advocating for broader use of these fiscal and pricing policies."

Nugent has a longstanding interest in NCDs. As Richard Skolnik, former Director for Health and Education at the World Bank and former lecturer at Yale University, comments, "Rachel has been among the few voices speaking and writing about the burden of NCDs and the evidence-based, cost-effective, doable, and fair approaches that countries need to reduce the burden of NCDs." Dean Jamison, Professor Emeritus at the Institute for Global Health Sciences, University of California, San Francisco, shares this view: "Perhaps more than any other economist Rachel has contributed to the modern study of how to address NCDs in highly resource-constrained environments", he says. In the mid-2000s, a focus of Nugent's research was, she explains, "tracking the money". In 2010, her paper "Where have all the donors gone?" revealed that "just 2.7% of international donor funding was for NCDs in developing countries in 2007". At the Global NCD Financing Dialogue in Copenhagen, Denmark, on April 9–11, 2018, Nugent will launch new research revealing that "investment in NCDs is rising but still tiny—only around US\$1 billion in 2015, and roughly the same percentage of overall external funding for health as 7 years ago". One of her hopes for the *Lancet* Taskforce is that it will bring attention to achieving coherent plans for financing NCDs: "We need to show that this is an agenda that everyone has a stake in. We are all going to get these diseases."

One of six children, Nugent grew up in Bloomington, IN, USA, where her father was a professor of history. It was on trips abroad for his work that the idea of an international

career took hold. "A family of eight travelling around Europe in a VW bug", she laughs. "It was great fun." Nugent enjoyed writing and left school "wanting to be a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*", she says. Part of her journalism degree at the University of Wisconsin-Madison involved a course in economics, which sparked her interest. 1970s stagflation in the USA also made an impression. "Economists seemed to be the problem and economists ought to have solutions", she says.

During postgraduate studies in economics at the George Washington University in Washington, DC, Nugent worked on agricultural trade policy at the think tank Resources for the Future and became "fascinated by international development". Encouraged by agricultural economist and then mentor Ed Rossmiller, she continued her research at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN in Italy. "I tell people I moved to Rome to work on a SOFA", she jokes of the flagship publication *The State of Food and Agriculture*. "That's where my interest in nutrition-related NCDs really began." Since then, her career has, she says, been "quite opportunistic". But the one constant has been her commitment to neglected global health issues.

The 2000s began with a move back to Washington, DC, for a fellowship at the Fogarty International Center at the US National Institutes of Health (NIH). "They were building capacity for research in developing countries and needed economics to be a part of that", she says. After becoming Director of Health and Economics at the Population Reference Bureau in 2004, she led a 6-year programme investigating how family planning and reproductive health contribute to economic development. Skolnik highlights another aspect of Nugent's broad expertise, "Rachel played an enormously important role in the leadership and management of the *Disease and Control Priorities (DCP) Third Edition*", he says.

Today, Nugent's priority at global research non-profit RTI International is how NCDs can be integrated into existing health-care platforms. "Most people think when you're able to deliver care for multiple conditions on the same platform it's going to be cheaper, very cost-effective, and save money. But nobody's really tested that proposition", she says. Andrea Feigl, health economist at the OECD, is clear about Nugent's influence on the global NCD agenda: "Global health enthusiast, dedicated mentor, and relentless warrior...there is literally no global NCD economics initiative in which she is not a major player and influencer." For Nugent economics are key. "I feel so passionate about how economics can make good change in the world", she says. "There's nothing more important than trying to improve people's health and wellbeing. That's what I hope to continue to do."



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