

# international and global health reproductive health specialist

## A TRUE TALE

JoAnn Lewis, MPH, first learned about public health through the Peace Corps, which she joined directly after graduating from the University of North Dakota. The Peace Corps put her through a rigorous crash course in health education techniques and language training in the U.S., the Virgin Islands and Trinidad. “It really was a life-changing experience,” she says. After training with public health nurses in Trinidad, Lewis was sent to Niger, West Africa, where for two years she worked as a health educator, organized and ran prenatal and well-baby clinics and provided community health education. She spent a third year working as a health educator, and later as manager on a mobile



JoAnn Lewis, MPH

vaccination team, which was part of one of the last smallpox eradication programs in Africa. She completed her stint with the Peace Corps working to train new volunteers.

On her return to the U.S., she worked for the Department of Health, Education and Welfare’s Office for Civil Rights for a year, before continuing her public health training at the Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health, where she received her MPH in 1975. She then worked for Planned Parenthood of Metropolitan Washington, D.C. in its pregnancy testing, counseling and referral service, and served as Coordinator for the Metropolitan Washington Family Planning Council. She came to Family Health International (FHI) in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, 23 years ago, where she is currently Senior Vice President for Reproductive Health Programs.

“Some of the most important world issues facing family planning right now include emphasis on reproductive rights, and the need to assure that the use of family planning is voluntary.”

## Profiling the job

A career in the field of reproductive health is most easily accessible through medical, educational or policymaking routes. Aspiring professionals might follow the medical route working in health care clinics, or community centers



## Reproductive Health Specialist Checkpoint

Do the family- and macro-level issues of population control fascinate you?

Would you enjoy influencing human behavior in ways that benefit individuals and whole populations?

Does the idea of traveling to and working in developing countries appeal to you?

*If so, read on*



**Did you know?** Meeting the existing demand for family planning services would reduce pregnancies in developing countries by an estimated 20 percent, and maternal deaths and injuries at least as much.<sup>1</sup>

run by non-governmental organizations, community groups and government agencies. The educational path can include study at medical, pharmacy and nursing schools as well as in schools of public health. Governments and non-governmental organizations with global reach most often employ those interested in the policy aspects of the field. Such organizations are the World Health Organization, the United Nations Population Fund and the International Planned Parenthood Federation.

The specific roles of reproductive health professionals depend on their particular areas of focus. A health educator might work to provide information and referral services, or possibly to provide health education at schools and to community organizations. In many countries, reproductive health specialists work in community programs rather than in clinics. They can be nurses, physicians, physician assistants or lay people trained to provide specific kinds of services. In fact, in many countries community-based distribution agents who are lay people provide the more basic methods of contraception — oral contraceptives, spermicides and condoms. “Typically, as long as providers are trained to offer basic information on how these methods work and what safety issues and potential side effects accompany them, much of this work can be done by supervised lay workers in places where local practice standards permit,” says Lewis.



Students — particularly those in master’s and doctoral programs — who are interested in working in global reproductive health, can apply for internships such as the Family Health International (FHI) internship program in special projects. Students can also gain experience through FHI’s new program YouthNet, a global program committed to improving the reproductive health and HIV/AIDS prevention behaviors of youth 10-24 years of age.

### **Global reproductive health**

The most broadly accepted definition of family planning is affording individuals and couples the means to have the number of children that they want. It is also a key strategy for reducing maternal mortality rates. Women

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who have four or more pregnancies in their lifetime are much more likely to have severe health consequences or die in childbirth than women who have one or two children. In resource-deprived countries and in developed countries as well, there is a direct correlation between the number of children born to each mother and her children's chances of survival. Compared to children who have just one or two siblings, siblings whose birth dates are too close in time, and who are born into families where they must compete with many other children for resources, are much more likely to have poor survival rates.

According to Lewis, parents of smaller families find it easier to send all their children to school, gain employment outside of the home, earn enough income to provide some possibility of upward social mobility and in many instances just feed their children. "At a societal level, lower population growth maximizes the general resource base and the availability of services. Fewer children mean healthier children, less crowding in schools, less unemployment and less human impact on the environment," says Lewis.

Focusing on these and related issues, Family Health International works to improve reproductive and family health around the world through biomedical and social science research, innovative health service delivery interventions and training and information programs. The organization works in partnership with universities, ministries of health and non-governmental organizations to conduct ongoing projects in the U.S. and more than 40 developing countries.

According to Lewis, one of the most important world issues confronting family planning right now, and an issue of great importance at FHI, is the need to ensure that the use of family planning methods is voluntary. In the definition of family planning, emphasis must be placed on the words "number of children that the parents want," Lewis says, and adds, "this is not something that should be imposed by governments or external bodies." Two other issues of significant concern are contraceptive safety and assuring that people fully understand the choices they are making. "We try to ensure that people are given complete access to information concerning the various contraceptive and reproductive health choices that exist, how they work and what side effects they may have. These are quality of care issues, but they are also reproductive rights issues that people must understand fully so they will be able to make their own choices," she says.



### Did you know?

Each year it is estimated that more than 585,000 women die — at least one woman every minute of every day — due to pregnancy-related causes.<sup>2</sup>

Currently, Lewis' department at FHI is implementing a new, five-year world-wide program funded by USAID to improve reproductive health and prevent HIV infection among youth of 10 to 24 years of age. She has worked with the program staff to develop its technical strategies, set priorities for specific activities and plan for the resources needed to carry them out. Negotiation with various implementing partner agencies and frequent consultation with the donor agency are also included. In the near future, Lewis will travel to one of the countries requesting assistance through the program to identify which organizations there either are or could be involved, and to conduct needs assessments for youth reproductive health. She and her staff will meet with representatives of the host country government, various NGOs, and the local USAID representatives to achieve consensus on the plan and how it will be implemented.

### A day in the life

As a Peace Corps volunteer in Africa and, later, through assignments with the federal government and Planned Parenthood of metropolitan Washington, JoAnn Lewis placed herself on what might be considered the front lines of public health. Today, as Senior Vice-President for Reproductive Health Programs at Family Health International, her responsibilities “are much more at a broad program level,” she says.

Lewis oversees several divisions of FHI, including health services research, health behaviors research, information dissemination and training and the YouthNet program. She is also a main point of contact for financial donors, and figures centrally in resource development, strategic planning and partnering with other reproductive health agencies.

It's a big job and a critically important one, but Lewis doesn't do it alone. “I oversee — and am supported by — a large and tremendously talented professional staff located at our headquarters in North Carolina, a branch office outside Washington and several regional and county offices,” she says. FHI's “extraordinarily varied and talented” workforce includes more than 500 physicians, clinicians, nurses, specialists in public health and adolescent health, social and behavioral scientists, anthropologists, demographers, economists, gender experts, epidemiologists, biostatisticians, trainers, instructional designers, journalists, social marketing experts and business professionals.

“Although we have personnel in the U.S. and abroad, most of our activities are international,” Lewis says. “So I often need to address the concerns and program issues of our international offices.” In particular, these can include assuring that field-based staff have the facilities and support they need to



carry out their work. “We also work hard at bridging cultural gaps between expatriate professionals and host-country governments and health ministries, so that a colloquial, two-way flow of health information is possible,” she says.

On most days, Lewis will be called upon to advise FHI professionals on any number of matters, including protocols for conducting programs and behavioral research on issues related to reproductive health, family planning and contraceptive technology.

Reviewing technical reports to donor agencies and making sure that funded programs

“are on track and making progress toward their goals” are other important aspects of her job. She also reviews special reports and research papers before their submission for publication.

“The research arena that I oversee includes understanding reproductive risk behaviors and increasing the range and availability of contraceptive methods that are safe, effective, acceptable and affordable,” Lewis says. “FHI also provides technical services and training programs for developing countries, especially in reproductive health and prevention and care services for people living with HIV/AIDS.” Among her top priorities is assuring that research and programs are geared toward understanding the personal behaviors and motivations that cause people to use — or not use — particular methods or services.

It’s hardly a surprise that Lewis is passionate about her work. “If you love to travel and expand your knowledge of other cultures — and I do — global public health is a wonderful field,” she says. “And when the reports come in after a program has been implemented, and the numbers point to declines in unplanned pregnancies and maternal and infant mortality and morbidity, then you *know* you’re in the right line of work.”



*“When people have smaller families, the resources available to the family have to be divided in fewer ways, so people can more easily send their children to school, women can be employed outside of the home and families have greater resources and perhaps access to some upward mobility at a societal level.”*

JoAnn Lewis,  
MPH



## career at a glance

### JoAnn Lewis, MPH

- 1991–Present **Senior Vice President** Reproductive Health Programs Department, Family Health International, Research Triangle Park, N.C.
- 1987–1991 **Vice President of Programs** Family Health International
- 1984–1987 **Director of Field Development and Training** Family Health International
- 1983–1984 **Director of Field Support** Family Health International (formerly IFRP)
- 1980–1983 **International Projects Administrator** International Fertility Research Program
- 1978–1980 **Project Leader** Maternity Care Studies, International Fertility Research Program
- 1976–1977 **Research Analyst** JWK International Corporation
- 1974–1975 **Program Coordinator** Planned Parenthood of Metropolitan Washington
- 1972–1973 **Civil Rights Specialist** Health and Social Services, USDHEW Office of Civil Rights
- 1971–1972 **Co-director and Trainer** Peace Corps Public Health Training Program
- 1968–1971 **Volunteer Health Educator** Maternal and Child Health, U.S. Peace Corps

1 <http://www.unfpa.org/mothers/contraceptive.htm>

2 [http://www.plannedparenthood.org/library/FAMILYPLANNINGISSUES/fpworldofdifference\\_fact.html](http://www.plannedparenthood.org/library/FAMILYPLANNINGISSUES/fpworldofdifference_fact.html)