

# Dr. Alexia Harrist

State health officer works for greater good

BY ROBERT MONGER, MD, AND WHITNEY HARMON

Photos courtesy of Dr. Alexia Harrist

**C**ongratulations to Alexia Harrist MD, PhD, the Wyoming state health officer, our Wyoming Medical Society 2021 Wyoming Physician of the Year!

Dr. Harrist is not only a world class physician and public health advocate, she is also an adventurous, interesting, compassionate and strong person. She is someone that lives a full life and is the epitome of a servant leader.

Dr. Harrist was born and raised in Massachusetts and attended college at Yale University, and then completed a MD/PhD program at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia from 2002 to 2010. Her PhD research studied the neuroscience of how HIV infects the brain.

Following the completion of her MD/PhD program Dr. Harrist completed a residency in pediatrics in Boston and then after residency stayed in Boston and worked for a year as a pediatrician in an urgent care clinic associated with an emergency department. It was during that time that she became interested in public health. She remembers regularly seeing children who came to the emergency department for treatment of problems such as asthma exacerbations that could have been prevented if they had had access to better outpatient healthcare, and she became aware of systemic issues such as families calling an ambulance for treatment of an ear infection because they didn't have reliable transportation to a doctor's office.

She liked that public health is a way to combine both basic science and clinical service, and that public health would allow her to find a balance between her love of laboratory science and clinical work. She applied and was accepted into a two-year public health fellowship through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, joining the Epidemic Intelligence Service. Her CDC fellowship brought her to the Wyoming Department of Health where she began work on a variety of public health issues including tularemia outbreaks, Colorado tick fever infections and the fetal death surveillance system.

Through her public health work with the CDC, Dr. Harrist has gone on a number of fascinating international trips including traveling to rural Sierra Leone twice in 2014-15 to help fight the Ebola outbreak. On her first trip to Sierra Leone she worked on contact tracing, and then on her second trip she returned to help set up Ebola vaccine trials. She traveled to rural Brazil during the Zika virus outbreak in 2016, working with infants and mothers to better understand the relationship between Zika infection during pregnancy and congenital malformations. She was also a medical officer for tuberculosis outbreak investigations at the CDC in Atlanta for almost one year.

In March 2017 Dr. Harrist began work as the Wyoming state epidemiologist at the Wyoming Department of Health,

and then in June 2017 she became the Wyoming state health officer.

Prior to the COVID pandemic Dr. Harrist worked on many different public health issues in Wyoming including disease surveillance systems, responding to outbreak clusters, and working on prevention activities such as suicide and overdose prevention. In addition to her many responsibilities managing the Wyoming public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Harrist has been trying to not lose focus on other important public health issues.


Dr. Harrist is an avid distance runner and previously ran marathons on a regular basis, but because her schedule has been so busy over the past year she has cut back to ONLY running 5 miles per day during the week and 10-plus miles per day on weekends. She loves living in Wyoming and enjoys an active outdoor lifestyle including hiking, skiing, mountain biking, fly fishing and playing with her new dog, a standard poodle named Rocky.

She advises medical students to think creatively about what they want to do with their careers, and to not let themselves get boxed into one specialty. For students who may be interested in public health she suggests considering



either a master of public health program or a CDC fellowship.

Dr. Harrist told us, "I love my job and working in Wyoming, and getting to talk to people—I love the personal interaction and connections between people that we have here in our state."

Congratulations to Dr. Alexia Harrist on being named the 2021 Wyoming Physician of the Year. She is an outstanding physician dedicated to improving public health here in Wyoming and certainly well deserving of this award. 

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