One of the preoccupying challenges in ensuring the public’s health is the growing divide between rich and poor. This problem is portrayed vividly in our cover story about the devastating consequences on mind and body of the Great Recession of 2007–2009—adverse effects that are worsened by income inequality.

Unfortunately, at the very moment when public health research is most needed to tackle these challenges, there is less government funding for such research. It’s no coincidence that there’s also a shrinking pool of young women and men who can afford to enter the field of public health, because the profession is comparatively less remunerative.

How can we close these gaps? One of the best ways is through enlightened philanthropy. That’s why I am so inspired by the many contributors who have strengthened our research, teaching, and learning at Harvard School of Public Health. Through gifts large and small, our contributors not only fund research but also make it possible for students who are passionate about making things better around the world to study with our School’s preeminent faculty.

Philanthropy is the tool that can balance the scales of justice—so that every human being can enjoy a healthy life, with all its possibilities. Thank you so much for your generosity.

Ellie Starr, 
Vice Dean for External Relations

Innovation and Future

A new $5 million, five-year gift to HSPH from Matthew and Monika McLennan will fund promising initiatives or research that is novel or experimental and not yet able to win traditional grant funding. The goal, says Matthew McLennan, is to “really move the dial” in terms of health impact, and to inspire others to give similar gifts.

The new gift establishes the McLennan Family Fund for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, which will expand discretionary resources for HSPH Dean Julio Frenk and future deans. Half of the gift will go to the Dean’s Fund for Innovation, where it will enable deans to allot funds quickly for fast-moving opportunities or for promising research that requires seed or bridge funding. The other half will help launch a new Dean’s Challenge Grant Program to support faculty working on innovative solutions to global health challenges.

“Monika and I think this is a powerful form of funding, particularly in a world where NIH [National Institutes of Health] funding, and funding as a whole, is hard to get,” says Matthew McLennan, who heads the Global Value team at First Eagle Investment Management. Adds Monika McLennan, “We also hope to inspire others to contribute to the efforts of the School.”

“This generous gift from Matthew and Monika McLennan represents an extremely important form of support because of its unrestricted nature,” says Dean Frenk. “The gift will allow me, and future deans of the School, to move nimbly in providing funds for promising new lines of research or ideas that might simply be too new or too unproven to win grants from federal agencies or private organizations, but that could have a huge impact on improving the health of people around the globe.”

Matthew McLennan cites the fight against malaria as a good example of why he and his wife chose to give unrestricted funding to HSPH.

“Fighting malaria isn’t about just providing a pill,” he says. “It’s about a whole system of figuring out how
to get people to take a pill. You have to consider financing and transportation networks and who’s going to deliver the pill. You have to think about incentive schemes to get communities to use mosquito nets. Problems like these require systemic solutions, and if one small part of that solution is missing, it can cause a problem. Monika and I feel that by giving the Dean the flexibility to target funds where they’re most needed—to whatever the missing pieces are in systemic solutions to complex problems—it will lead to the biggest positive impact from our investment.”

McLennan says the gift is intended to give new ideas at HSPH a chance to bloom, making it more likely they’ll win traditional grant funding farther on. He also hopes to inspire others to provide similar support. “If we plant a number of different seeds and a handful take root and provide game-changing solutions to public health problems, it might spur others to give unrestricted funds like this to fund innovative research,” he says. “Our big-picture goal is to change the whole pattern of public health research funding—to shift the focus from funding only proven ideas to funding early-stage ideas.”

“Harvard School of Public Health is filled with extraordinary people,” says Monika McLennan. “The professors and alumni have played a role in so many important initiatives—fighting polio, eradicating smallpox, pushing for cleaner air, working to prevent cancer, trying to make health care more cost-effective. Matthew and I have thought long and hard about what actions we can take to provide a better future for the world, and the School’s many achievements compelled us to be part of this very important work.”

The McLennans’ connection with HSPH spans the past decade, through the administrations of both Dean Frenk and former Dean Barry Bloom. Members of the Board of Dean’s Advisors and the Leadership Council Executive Committee, they previously established a student fellowship fund and gave to the Dean’s Fund for Innovation and the Annual Fund.

“Every time I interact with faculty, staff, and students at HSPH, I learn of new aspects of the School that catch me by surprise and intrigue me,” says Monika McLennan. “It is such a pleasure to see the extraordinary nurturing from talented faculty members that inspires students to reach tremendous heights and never to give up on their dreams, and often to assume leadership roles across the world. Matthew and I are so proud to be part of HSPH’s extraordinary effort to improve the global future of the next generation.”

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—Matthew McLennan