

Rx for



EXCELLENCE

ED BAKER and the CENTER for HEALTH POLICY work to help Idahoans stay healthy

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Ed Baker is director of Boise State's Center for Health Policy. The center partners with public and private organizations on health care studies.

Ed Baker brings an enthusiasm to his work that fills any room – whether it's a medical clinic, a government office or a college classroom. It isn't just his Philadelphia accent and fast-paced style that set him apart. Though he's an academic, Baker isn't afraid of sounding like a business consultant.

Baker, the director of Boise State's Center for Health Policy (CHP), is comfortable with phrases like "analyzing business problems," "meeting or exceeding client expectations," and "producing high-quality deliverables."

His lexicon reflects 20 years of experience on the business side of the \$2 trillion health

care industry and the results-oriented business model behind CHP's growing success.

The "deliverables" in Baker's line of work are information – comprehensive information about health care issues in Idaho. Whether focusing on the effectiveness of tobacco cessation programs, the numbers of physicians practicing in rural areas, the benefits of wellness programs or the percentage of state dollars spent on Medicaid recipients, Baker and his colleagues collect and analyze data from literally thousands of reports, documents and interviews. Their work is having a profound and growing impact on the health care services utilized by Idaho's 1.3 million residents by helping define health care policy at the highest levels in the state.

Ed Baker, right, discusses a recent study with David Schmitz, M.D., associate director of the Family Medicine Residency of Idaho.



CARRIE QUINNEY PHOTO

“I want to help people be healthy,” Baker said. “My main focus is to make the center a good partner and to provide accurate, timely information so that we can help every Idahoan have access to high quality, affordable health care.

By helping to create understanding about the costs and benefits of programs and policies, we can help shape the policies and choices that will allow that to happen.”

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

Comprised of faculty and students from the College of Health Sciences and other academic units of the university, CHP works on a contractual basis with government agencies such as the Idaho Division of Medicaid and with nonprofits, including the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Terry Reilly Health Services. In addition, the center often partners with agencies and organizations on a variety of health policy studies.

A results-oriented business model has been a key factor in the success of the Center for Health Policy.

Under Baker’s leadership, the center has earned a growing reputation for providing insightful research and analysis. Idaho’s Department of Health and Welfare (IDHW) is just one of a number of repeat clients. During the past two years, CHP has conducted more than 20 studies under contracts worth more than \$600,000 with various departments of IDHW, the region’s major health care providers and physician associations, among many others.

The current year is shaping up to be even bigger for the center as a growing number of groups that otherwise wouldn’t have the manpower to do it

themselves are turning to CHP to conduct surveys and provide analysis on the state of health care.

The center’s success is attributable to many factors, including an entrepreneurial, results-oriented approach, said James Girvan, dean of the College of Health Sciences. The Boise metropolitan area’s role as the medical and governmental center for the state of Idaho gives the center’s relatively small staff a unique opportunity to have a profound impact in the critical area of health policy, he added.

Baker’s consultant-like approach has earned him a certain degree of distinction among his colleagues. While fun-loving, Baker is also direct, with a dynamic “East Coast” style. Ultimately, though, his loud, rough-and-tumble, Philly-tinged irreverence and banter endears, while his professional abilities and commitment earn respect.

“Ed’s not going to talk around an issue because it’s uncomfortable for a client,” said Girvan. It’s that forthrightness, matched with Baker’s 20 years as a health care industry consultant and employee in a broad scope of capacities, that has made CHP a key partner for a wide range of clients and community collaborators.

“We’re here to provide the best information we can to help policymakers make the best possible decisions about the health care of Idahoans,” Girvan added. “Ed is certainly a top-notch academic. But his understanding of health care as a business gives him an edge that makes his work very valuable to clients. They trust that his perspective and style will provide them with unbiased, relevant and accurate information to act upon.”

HEALTH CARE QUESTIONS

Baker's clients back up Girvan's assessment. Leslie Clement, director of Idaho Health and Welfare's Division of Medicaid, hired Baker and CHP in 2006 to research and evaluate health care premium assistance programs in six sample states for possible adaptation in Idaho. The end product was a report that included costs modeling and identification of funding sources, as well as an evaluation of how well other state models would fit the unique aspects of Idaho's health care system.

"The things we work on with Ed are very practical," Clement said. "I'm not looking for studies that are just interesting, or high-altitude programmatic policy pieces. We're looking for information that goes to the heart of our mission and services. We want research that gets down to identifying resources, data systems and potential partners. We want a how-to, not something that's theoretical and will have no application for us."

According to Clement, it's essential for agencies such as the Division of Medicaid to have a relationship with centers such as Boise State's CHP. "The complexity of the system requires strong analytical skills, and we don't have the capacity to meet those needs," she said. "I don't think we'd have the products we have without that relationship."

Success breeds success. An endorsement by Clement's Division of Medicaid led directly to the landing of CHP's biggest fish yet. In conjunction with a \$400,000 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant awarded to the Urban Institute, Baker and CHP were contracted to provide Idaho data for a study of the impact of Medicaid reform on access to care, program sustainability, administrative efficiency and impact on the state budgets in Idaho and Kentucky.

Other projects on tap for the center include a joint project with Boise State's College of Business and Economics and the Idaho Meth Project, a public-private prevention program aimed at reducing first-time use of methamphetamine through public service messaging, public policy and community outreach. The study will determine the economic impact the use of meth has on Idaho's economy.

"These are times when health policy issues are of paramount significance and the decisions that we make will have an impact for decades to come," said David Schmitz, associate director of the Family Medicine Residency of Idaho, a CHP partner in a study examining recruitment and retention challenges faced by rural hospitals and family physicians in Idaho. "The work of Ed and the center gives us invaluable data on which to build those policies."

Schmitz is one of a number of associates with

whom Baker has built a close working partnership. Many of these associates, including students who work for CHP, "would run through a wall for Ed," Girvan said.

"Students really love him because he takes care of them," said Ayaka Nukui, a graduate student in health sciences who works with Baker at CHP. "He's fun, very friendly and easygoing. But when he needs something done, it's time to work. He gets very focused and gets it done. I can see why clients like him."

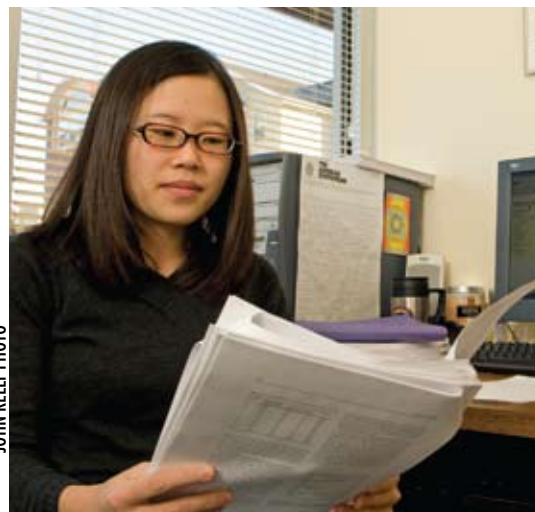
"It's really interesting to learn about these important health issues and also to feel like you are contributing information that could help address them," said Ayaka Nukui, a graduate student in health sciences.

As part of her work for CHP, Nukui analyzes computer databases and writes reports for a number of the center's ongoing projects. Nukui said she finds the work both challenging and rewarding, and that it also is providing her with valuable hands-on experience. After finishing her master's degree later this year, she plans to pursue a career as a health policy consultant.

"It's really interesting to learn about these important health issues and also to feel like you are contributing information that could help address them," Nukui said. "I have been really impressed with how many community partners are working with CHP."

According to Girvan, CHP's results-oriented philosophy, along with its desire to partner with organizations in both the public and private sectors, will help drive the center's continuing success.

"Optimally, the CHP is the first place policymakers and program directors will look when seeking assistance to obtain the unbiased analyses needed to inform health policy decisions," Girvan said. ♦



Ayaka Nukui, a graduate student in health sciences, reviews government documents as part of her work for CHP.

JOHN KELLY PHOTO