

INTERVIEW

Interview with Prof. Sara Markowitz at Emory University

By Jing Xu, Ph.D.

Dr. Sara Markowitz is an Associate Professor of Economics at Emory University and Research Associate at the National Bureau of Economic Research. Dr. Markowitz's research interests are on the economics of healthy and unhealthy behaviors, with an emphasis on the health of children and adolescents. She publishes widely in general and specialty academic journals, and serves as an editor of the *Southern Economic Journal*. Her research has been featured in media publications such as the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Business Week*. Markowitz has also won numerous research and teaching awards. She is a 1998 graduate of the PhD program in economics from the Graduate School of the City University of New York.



Prof. Sara Markowitz

Jing: Paul Samuelson once remarked that health economics and environmental economics might be the areas where major breakthroughs occur. Do you think that the moment has come for health economics?

Sara: I think that some of the big breakthroughs in health economics have already happened. Back in 1972, Michael Grossman changed the way economists think about human health with his seminal work on the demand for health. His insights into health as both an investment and a commodity that is produced with inputs have made a tremendous impact on the discipline. Before then, the field was often referred to as "medical economics" reflecting the assumption that health and medical care are more or less the same thing. We now know it as "health economics" due to large part to the shift in our thinking that resulted from Grossman's work showing that medical care is a small part of a larger story. There is now a staggering amount of research that arose from Grossman's ideas that examines all aspects of the demand for health both in conjunction with, and separately from, medical care. We also have a wealth of information on how all sorts of public policies can affect health outcomes. Much of this work uses the advances in econometrics to help establish causal relationships and credit goes to those individuals who bridged the fields. We now need to do a much better job getting the information out to the public health community, the politicians and the general public.

Jing: What advice do you have for young students and scholars in health econ? Or for female health economists?

Sara: I think it's becoming more and more difficult for young scholars to identify research topics that both contribute to our knowledge of the world and push the literature forward in new ways. The training that often comes along with a PhD in economics tends to focus on the methods and details at the expense of a bigger picture. I have seen tremendously sophisticated theories and models generated for the most uninteresting of questions. My advice to the young scholars in health economics is to start any research topic by asking themselves the following questions: Why should I do this research? Who will care about it? How big is the problem that the research addresses, or is it even a problem at all? These are basic questions that are far too often overlooked. But they are also tough question to answer since they require scholars to reject their own ideas. Research that is done because "it's easy to do" or "the data are available" or "no

one has done it before" are not good reasons on their own. Remember, no one will be impressed by your superior ability to take derivatives if there is no point to the exercise.

But the work does not stop with a good idea. Another challenge many young scholars face is in their ability to tell a good story when writing papers. The research question needs to be well motivated and should be very clear about how the work makes a contribution. The paper's arguments should be spelled out in lay terms before anything technical is presented. The health economist has a difficult job in that research should be aimed at two audiences, those in the profession and those in the public health community. But only through effective communicating can researchers advance our collective knowledge and work towards solving some of the major problems of our time.