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Health and Healthcare among the Plain Anabaptist People

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This issue of the *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies (JAPAS)* marks the eleventh year of publication of this journal, the flagship journal of the Amish & Plain Anabaptist Studies Association (APASA). In the past we have devoted entire issues to specific topics, including Beachy Amish-Mennonite churches [2017 5(1)], past and future directions of Amish studies [2017 5(2)], Ohio Amish schisms [2019 7(2)], gender-focused research [2020 8(2)], and agriculture and the environment [2021 9(2)], and the plain people at midcentury [2023 11(1)]. In addition, the 2018 6(2) issue included a special section on health among the Amish. This issue [2023 11(2)] is dedicated, in its entirety, to sociocultural aspects of health and medicine among plain Anabaptists. The articles compiled here span a wide variety of topics including: health beliefs, attitudes toward Amish, genetic screening, midwifery, mental health, allergy and immunity, nutrition, oil therapy massage, water quality, and plain people's experiences with health and medicine from the perspective of plain authors. Contributors include both plain and "English" authors.

Contributions in this issue include six original research studies, three articles written by and about service providers, two essays, and several

book reviews on health and other topics. The content represents diverse plain people, including Old Order Amish, Swartzentruber Amish, and Old Order Mennonites, while geographic coverage includes Wisconsin, eastern and western Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York, and Ontario. Research studies were conducted about children, university students, and women of child-bearing age, farmers, and even livestock.

The original, peer reviewed research included in this issue covers a wide gamut of health topics. Study findings are pertinent for plain and non-plain audiences alike, particularly those related to culturally adapted collaboration. Kumar Chaudhary and colleagues describe Old Order Mennonite farmers' perceptions of their health and that of their livestock in relation to the quality of their well water in Lancaster County, PA. An apparent disconnect was found between participants' perceptions of well water quality and actual water quality as assessed by water quality testing. Pollin and colleagues extend current research on genetics in the Lancaster Amish to assess Amish views on genetic screening for a mutation common in this community causing familial hypercholesterolemia. They report significant community interest in screening for this disorder but at the same



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time highlight concerns expressed by the community about costs of genetic screening as a potential obstacle. Schoessow describes her research of health beliefs and related practices, as well as health seeking behaviors, among Swartzentruber Amish in Wisconsin. She makes numerous recommendations for healthcare providers based on the importance of knowledge of and sensitivity to this conservative group's culture. Randall Simpson and colleagues assessed vitamin D status of children of Old Order Anabaptists living in Southwestern Ontario. They observed generally adequate vitamin D levels despite lower reported amounts of dietary vitamin D intake. Kaplan et al. describe the research partnership they have fostered with Old Order Mennonite mothers to study the development of allergies and protective immunity in Mennonite children in New York State. Keys to success in this ongoing project include attentiveness to cultural practices, engagement with key informants, and dissemination of findings to participants. The research study conducted by Wyss and Hess differs from that of others in this issue because theirs was a study of a non-plain population. The researchers investigated attitudes toward the Amish held by nursing and social work students attending a university in a region of Ohio where the likelihood of contacts between healthcare professionals and Amish is elevated. They found that students' overall awareness of other cultures improved their attitude toward the Amish and its culture.

Three papers authored by service providers, including several plain caregivers, provide perspectives about care that are relevant to both plain peoples as well as healthcare professionals. Each of these articles highlights the cultural importance of home-based health care among plain peoples. Several plain caregivers and Hess co-authored an article on oil therapy massage. They describe the origin and practice of this therapy as a way to complement burn and wound care. They highlight the spread of this culturally-adapted service because of its inclusion of sociocultural values of plain people, including mutual social support, religious faith, and a preference for natural remedies and home-based care. With a focus on mental

health care, Bright and Raber describe an innovative residential facility, Mother's Heart, where plain women experiencing postpartum depression receive personal, in-depth attention. The providers highlight the success of this home; mothers are allowed to keep their babies with them during in-patient care. Soulliere describes the work of midwives in Ontario Canada who adapt their care to cultural preferences of plain families in the communities they serve, particularly for home births and related needs.

Of special note is the essay written by J. Anderson. In her article about plain-authored books, she posits that healthcare professionals could learn a great deal about plain cultures by reading bedside diaries and caregiver journals. These books enlighten readers on life's experiences and include cultural aspects of grief, faith, caring, and surrender to God, among others. Anderson provides an extensive bibliography in this article and suggestions on procuring copies. Sauder, a physician and Old Order River Brethren adherent, shares his perceptions of plain peoples' responses to government mandates and COVID-19. Sauder maintains that Anabaptist culture and beliefs did not exhibit a unified response to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. vaccinations, mask-wearing, and social distancing) but rather that their reasons for general resistance to COVID-19 public health measures mirror those given by segments of the general population.

A unique feature of *JAPAS* are the book reviews contributed by plain Anabaptists. Three reviews are relevant to this issue's health theme, including one about a family living with Hirschsprung's Disease, another about the influence of religious beliefs and practices on healthcare among Low German Mennonites, and a third on the issue of safety awareness and accident prevention around the home and farm.

From many directions, this special issue of *JAPAS* pushes forward research addressing sociocultural aspects of health and medicine among Amish and plain Anabaptists. We hope that these population health contributions will drive continued thought, discussion, and research.