

Biography for Tara Kirk Sell, PhD

Dr. Sell is a Senior Scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Environmental Health and Engineering at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. At the Center, she conducts, manages, and leads research projects to develop a greater understanding of potentially large-scale health events. She also serves as an Associate Editor of the peer-reviewed journal Health Security.

Dr. Sell's work focuses on improving public health policy and practice in order to reduce the health impacts of disasters and terrorism. Her primary research interests focus on health security: the broad intersection of public health and national security. She studies past responses to public health emergencies to discover ways to improve future preparedness and response. From terrorism to pandemics and natural disasters, she employs mixed methods and multidisciplinary approaches to examine how the public, practitioners, and policymakers prepare for and respond to public health emergencies. In turn, she works to build the evidence base to advance policies and practices to minimize impacts of emergent threats. Though seemingly distinct, these topics are all linked by crosscutting preparedness and response needs critical to the improvement of the field of health security.

A hallmark of her work is the discovery of scientifically rigorous results while simultaneously interfacing with policymakers, public health practitioners, and the general public to translate research findings into actionable and evidence-based practices. She works collaboratively and purposefully to translate and disseminate findings and recommendations to target audiences in meaningful ways, such as engaging in collaborative work with the CDC to improve public communication or co-developing Event 201, an immersive pandemic scenario to engage new stakeholders such as the private sector in pandemic preparedness.

Dr. Sell joined the Center in 2009 as an Analyst and subsequently served as Senior Analyst and Associate. Prior to joining the Center, she maintained a career as a professional athlete. She was a member of the USA national swim team for 8 years, and she served as captain for 6 USA national swim teams. In 2004 she broke the world record in the 100 breaststroke (Short Course Meters), and she earned a silver medal at the 2004 Olympics in Athens.

Dr. Sell completed her PhD at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in the Department of Health Policy and Management, where she was a Sommer Scholar. Her dissertation work focused on public policy responses to emerging epidemics and specifically how the media and policy intertwine in the case of Ebola and the health consequences of these policy actions. She received a BA in human biology and an MA in anthropological sciences from Stanford University. In 2005 she was a Rhodes Scholar finalist.