

Finger on The Pulse

Spotlighting the people behind the science headlines

Where does personality come from? What's it like to work in the emergency room during a global pandemic? Is there a cure for heart ache? Weekly podcast The Pulse asks the science and health questions you want to know the answers to, and those you hadn't thought of yet. In this interview, host and executive producer Maiken Scott told Research Outreach more about the show's history and mission.

Ready to go on a sonic adventure into the world of science and health? Then look no further than weekly podcast The Pulse. This inquisitive podcast from WHYY aims to tell science and health stories from the ground up, so that all of us can better understand not just the science but the people working on and researching the issues that really matter to us today.

In an interview with The Pulse host and executive producer Maiken Scott, *Research Outreach* found out about some of the exciting upcoming episodes and why she believes that to engage people with science, they need to be introduced to the people behind it.

What is the idea behind The Pulse?

The Pulse is a radio show and podcast about the people and places at the heart of health and science. It aims to explain issues in health and science, but the lens is through people and their experiences. Our goal is to make our topics approachable for a curious but inexpert

audience. We're not a 'news' show, so while our topics relate to current events, we aren't driven by the headlines. Our stories tend to be longer, and 'breathe' a bit. Right now, we're working on a show about plastic. It's an important topic that's certainly in the news often, but it's not making big headlines at the moment. We'll explore the future of plastics made from renewable materials, ways to compost or breakdown plastics, and the role of plastics in innovation. We're also working on a show about personality, and who we are at the core. We tackle a wide variety of topics, and we always enjoy introducing our listeners to the people behind the science and innovation.

How did you personally come to be involved with The Pulse?

I was a reporter at WHYY in Philadelphia and part of our health and science desk, covering mostly mental health, when the station decided to launch this new programme. I had experience in hosting and producing and was chosen to host

this new show. We quickly decided to offer the programme to other stations in the public radio network. The Pulse is now heard on 70+ stations across the US and is available as a weekly podcast. I see my role as translating scientific findings and complex issues to our audience in a way that is accessible in an audio format. I'm not an expert, I don't have a degree in science, but I'm interested and curious and always love to learn new things. My hope is to inspire other people to be curious and excited about the world around them too.

What kind of stories do you tell? And who do you aim to address?

Recently, many of our stories and episodes have focused on issues related to the pandemic. We've covered many public health issues; we did a whole episode on vaccine development, and about the 'new normal' when it comes to our workplaces. During a 'regular' year, our stories cover anything from space exploration to infectious disease prevention, topical steroids or new



Many of the guests were public health experts, who have been on the front lines, making tough decisions, and have been facing a lot of scrutiny from the public.

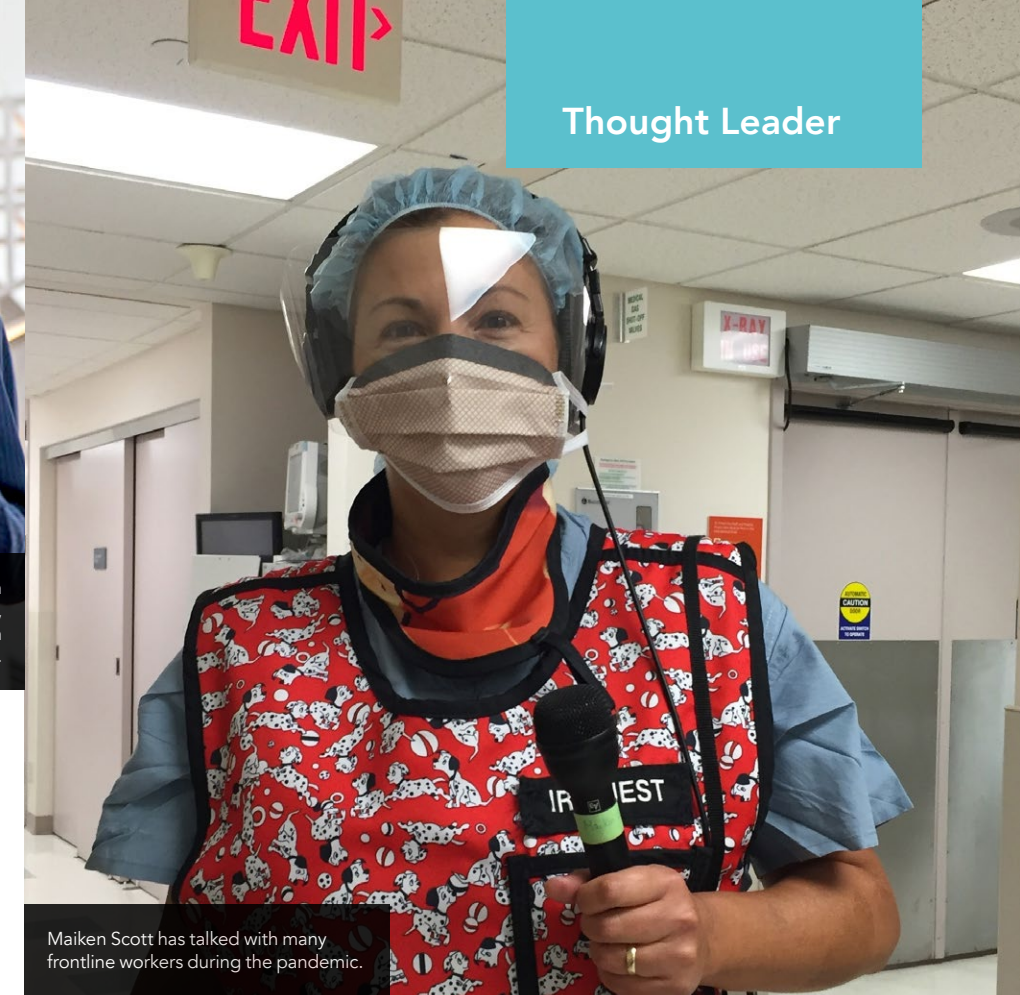


Maiken Scott is host and executive producer of The Pulse podcast.

plastic materials. Each episode has a theme that we explore more deeply through feature stories or expert interviews. Our core audience is an educated lay audience.

Have you spoken to any of the frontline workers about their experiences?

Yes, for example, we interviewed an emergency room doctor, Avir Mitra, who worked in a New York City hospital in March 2020. He described the fear and confusion among his colleagues, and how nobody had a 'playbook for a pandemic'. He also described how physicians were learning new things about the virus and its treatment every day, for example, how to best keep patients off ventilators to improve their chances of a full recovery. We also heard from a nurse who kept an audio diary every day after she came home from her shift and described her total physical and emotional exhaustion.



Maiken Scott has talked with many frontline workers during the pandemic.

We spoke to a paediatrician who was trying to weigh up the risks and benefits of allowing kids to go back to school. He explained that many scientists seem to have misunderstood the role of children in spreading the virus. Many of our guests were public health experts, who have been on the front lines, making tough decisions, and have been facing a lot of scrutiny from the public. One of the important takeaways for them has been to think not just about the message, but

by routine? Shy or the life of the party? Figuring out what makes us tick is an important part of understanding how we function within our families, communities and workplaces. Thousands of tests online promise to assess your personality – but what are they actually measuring? Where does personality come from, how does it form, and where does it live? In this episode, we explored the science behind how we become who we are.

I see my role as translating scientific findings and complex issues to our audience in a way that is accessible.

also the right messenger. Who is most likely to be trusted? What's the right tone that engages people, and doesn't sound preachy?

Tell me more about the new show on personality.

Are you an introvert or an extrovert? Open to new experiences or comforted

We hear stories about what makes for a healthy personality, how our brains betray who we are, and why we change depending on who we're with. You can find a [link here](#) and listen as well! Personality is one of those issues where the more you look, the more you find, and realise that you hold a lot of assumptions about what personality is

"Nobody has a playbook for the pandemic": The Pulse interviewed an emergency room doctor during the pandemic.

Could tiny organisms devour our plastic trash?

Are you an introvert or an extrovert? The Pulse's new show on personality lets you find out what makes you tick.

and how it forms, that may not be true. It was a very fun look inside the self!

What makes a good story for you?

Good characters, tension, a sense of place or 'scene' recordings if we can get them (that has been challenging during the pandemic!). The best stories have a surprise twist in them, or answer questions you never knew you had. Often, great stories can be found when we explore an issue that we think we already know about, or don't see as all that interesting. One of my favorite interviews was with a chemist about how laundry detergents work, and what it takes to develop them. There are so many fascinating details in our everyday lives, hidden in plain sight.

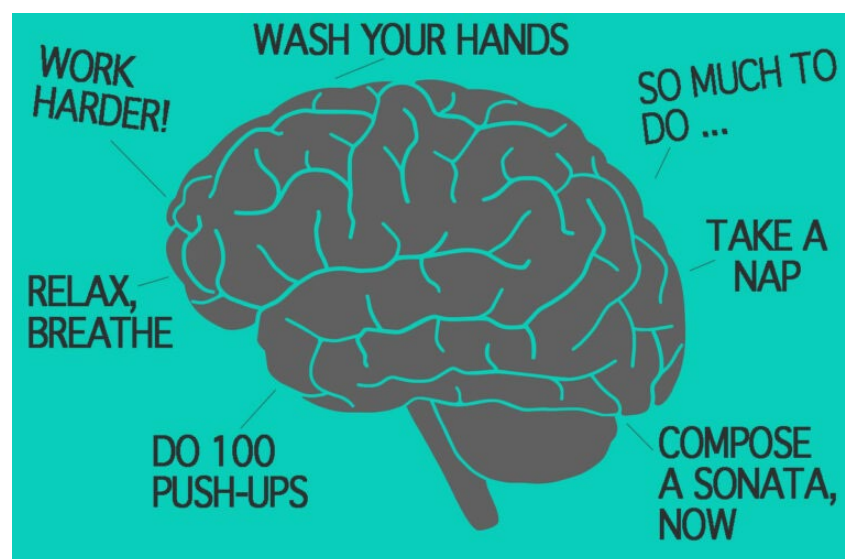
Who do you feature in your podcasts?

Scientists, researchers, historians, physicians, nurses, patients, consumers. We want to hear from experts, but we also want to get to know them as people and find out why they are passionate about what they do.

As I mentioned, the show I'm working on right now is about plastic. We interviewed several polymer scientists, for example [Chris DeAmritt](#) of [Phantom Plastics](#), [Erika Erickson](#) of the National Renewable Energy Laboratory and [Ron Kander](#) of Drexel University. For another episode, I just taped an interview with



Maiken Scott and science writer Ed Yong during a podcast.



In a recent podcast, listeners learned about optimising brain function in times when you need it most.

psychologist [Tasha Eurich](#) who spoke about self-awareness. I've explored space and black holes with astronomer [Derek Pitts](#) and talked about creativity with [Natalie Nixon](#). I enjoyed learning more about gratitude and why it matters from [Jacqueline Mattis](#) of Rutgers University. For our vaccine episode, I spoke with paediatrician and vaccine developer [Paul Offit](#). So, it really runs the gamut! We try to find

discovery. We also dedicated an entire episode to love, which was a lot of fun. We discussed what neuroscientists are learning about this emotion and met a scientist who is researching a cure for heart ache. Another favorite episode this year was about creativity and brain performance during times of high stress and crisis. We learned a lot about optimising your brain function in times when you need it the most.

The best stories have a surprise twist in them, or answer questions you never knew you had.

experts who have a lot of passion for their topic, and can talk about it so compellingly that even a listener who initially thinks 'I don't care about this issue at all' finds themselves drawn into the conversation.

Which story or learning experience are you most fond of?

I really enjoyed producing an episode about the 50th anniversary of the moon landing in 2019 and getting to meet some of the astronauts who were part of that mission. I am always interested in science history and the backstory of a

What was the most surprising fact that you learned whilst hosting the podcast?

So many, I don't even know where to begin. Recently, I learned about 'plastivores' – organisms that live off plastic. They could play a key role in digesting our plastic trash. A few years ago, I was very surprised to learn that scientists don't understand how exactly anaesthesia works; as in, they don't understand the actual process. We have learned to use anaesthesia safely, but we don't understand how it works! That still blows my mind. In our

50th anniversary of the moon landing episode, I was surprised to hear about some of the very serious challenges along the way, which made the fact that the landing happened and the astronauts made it back safely seem even more like a miracle.

What are your plans for the future of The Pulse?

This year, we hope to focus on some of the fallout from the pandemic. What have we learned? How will these new vaccines impact the future of vaccine development? We also want to return to doing more shows about non-health related science.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell our readers?

We're always interested in hearing about your work so get in touch!

the pulse

WHYY

W: <https://whyy.org/programs/the-pulse/>

Twitter: [@WHYYThePulse](#)

Instagram: [@WHYYThePulse](#)

Facebook: [WHYYThePulse](#)