

The future of Public Health in Europe

Role and functions of a European Public Health Association

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The way in which health is considered is changing rapidly. Health is now seen in a much more complex way than it was when it meant only health care services.

It is seen today with its many determinants spread across the whole of society and it is also viewed as one of the key drivers, as well as one of the most important outcomes of societal development.

Nowadays at global level there are new challenges and trends: globalisation, privatisation, widening inequities in the distribution of wealth and the access to health and social services, increasing population migration, accelerating technological innovation, increasing environmental pollution and climate change. These trends are having a profound impact on health and health equity, as well as on the ways in which society responds to health challenges and have given rise to the need for a renewed paradigm for health improvement.

The context of change is so compelling that a new vision of health governance at global, regional and national levels is required. Health as a vital element in development must be considered a part of government responsibility, and structures for the advancement of health improvement must reflect this.

EUPHA is representing today a considerable number of European public health researchers, experts and professionals. These people's expertise is vital for formulating new public health policies, implementing public health programmes, and reforming public health practice. They have repeatedly shown that present structures and processes are not adequate in this new environment and urgently need to be changed.

EUPHA'S MAIN AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

EUPHA brings together professionals, researchers, trainers and policy-makers working in the field of public health from most European countries with the common goal of contributing to improving the health sta-

tus of all Europeans and reducing health inequalities among them. This general goal is pursued through several sub-goals: build capacity and knowledge in the field of public health, create favourable conditions for it to spread, be shared, and finally be effectively transferred into practice and policy in all sectors of public health, at all levels and in all countries. At all stages of the process, we have chosen to give priority to a co-operational approach to work in partnership with governmental and nongovernmental organisations and institutions working in our field and sharing our objective.

This means that collecting all of Europe's public health-related groups under the common roof of an umbrella organisation, as is usually the case in scientific organisations, is just the beginning for us. We succeeded in achieving this objective and more, and are looking forward to a promising future.

EUPHA represents the largest network for European Public Health and has been expanding steadily since its establishment in 1992. Our annual conferences, which are each devoted to a specific Public Health topic and, from 2008, are organised jointly with ASPHER (Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region), are the largest European event in the field of Public Health and are recognised as a crucial appointment for both researchers and, increasingly over the last years, professionals and policy-makers. Being a EUPHA member means having access to the most up-to-date information on what is happening in public health research, policy and practice at the European level, through a series of tools that include access to the European Journal of Public Health (edited by the Oxford University Press), the full version of our website, the monthly newsletter, the EUPHA Reports and the recently activated EUPHApedia, a user-friendly online database of documents encompassing the whole scope of public health, which is continuously updated and open to contributions by the members themselves.

EUPHA MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

A multidisciplinary approach to public health is so fundamental today for at least two reasons. The first one is a traditional one, and is intrinsic to the very nature of public health: improving the health status of a population is a result that cannot be achieved by professionals of only one discipline. It requires coordination of skills and expertise from sectors as diverse as medicine, economics, statistics and epidemiology, environmental sciences, social, political and government sciences. And it requires the interaction of professionals with extremely different job descriptions, ranging from general practitioners to elected and non-elected public managers in government agencies, from academic researchers to representatives of local institutions working in the field. This consideration has been integrated into the »Health in All Policies« policy strategy approach, officially endorsed by WHO in 1999 and the European Union in 2006: starting from the acknowledgment that health and well-being are also determined by policy sectors other than healthcare, it proposes that the consequences on health of actions in non-health sectors are taken into account to address health in a more integrated and effective way.

The second reason, which has been gaining importance over the last decades, is technological progress. We cannot afford to ignore the opportunities for public health provided to us by advances both in basic biomedical research, physics, chemistry, and in other seemingly distant fields like computer technology, environmental chemistry and economic modelling. This is especially true for Europe, where the economic conditions and the political context allow for investments in healthcare, health promotion and prevention that are unthinkable elsewhere.

The health status of Europeans has been improving, but we still have risk factors that have never been addressed satisfactorily in our history, such as air pollution and gender inequalities; threats that we thought we had defeated, but that are rearing their head again, like sexually transmitted diseases; and of course new threats we have to be prepared to deal with for the first time, like the far-reaching implications of climate change and the effect of economic crises like that we have been experiencing on socio-economic inequalities. It is therefore essential that public health moves forward, and such a progress can only be made by means of a collaborative effort – the challenges we have to face are transnational and local or regional initiatives or efforts will never be as effective as international ones in dealing with them.

We currently consider capacity building as a necessary condition for moving from theory to practice in

using public health tools and instruments to make a difference in terms of health status and well-being. EUPHA supports a wide series of activities that are oriented to enhance the skills and knowledge, but also the commitment and the confidence of public health practitioners and professionals. Among these are the sponsorship of training activities, the support of the exchange of information oriented to diffuse best practices and the active and direct cooperation with leading international organisations such as the European Union and the WHO. This involves the levels of human resources, of organisational structures and processes, and of the legal and institutional framework they operate in – both nationally and internationally.

The researchers belonging to our network produce an impressive amount of high-quality scientific evidence, which is funnelled into communication channels such as our Annual Conference, the European Journal of Public Health and now EUPHApedia. We constantly aim for advocacy in our efforts so that the strategies we support are actually applied by local in-

Abstract

DIE ZUKUNFT VON PUBLIC HEALTH IN EUROPA:

AUFGABEN UND FUNKTIONEN EINER EUROPÄISCHEN PUBLIC-HEALTH-ORGANISATION

Die Wahrnehmung der Gesundheit unterliegt derzeit einem raschen Wandel. Sie wird nun viel komplexer gesehen als zu der Zeit, als man sich ausschließlich auf Leistungen des Gesundheitswesens beschränkte. Heute wird sie zusammen mit ihren zahlreichen Determinanten für die gesamte Gesellschaft ganzheitlich betrachtet und als eine der zentralen Triebkräfte sowie als eines der wichtigsten Ergebnisse der gesellschaftlichen Entwicklung erachtet.

Auf internationaler Ebene ergeben sich nun neue Herausforderungen und Trends: Globalisierung, Privatisierung, wachsende Ungleichheiten bei der Verteilung des Wohlstands und des Zugangs zu Gesundheits- und Sozialleistungen, zunehmende Migration, immer raschere technologische Innovation, steigende Umweltverschmutzung und Klimawandel. Diese Trends wirken sich tiefgreifend auf die Gesundheit und die gesundheitliche Chancengleichheit aus, aber auch auf die Art und Weise, wie die Gesellschaft auf Herausforderungen im Bereich der Gesundheit reagiert. Daraus ergibt sich Bedarf für ein neues Paradigma der Gesundheitsverbesserung. In dem Umfeld, in dem sich dieser Wandel vollzieht, sprechen zwingende Gründe für ein neues Zielbild der Good Governance im Gesundheitswesen auf internationaler, regionaler und nationaler Ebene. Als unverzichtbares Element der Entwicklung muss die Gesundheit als ressortübergreifende Aufgabe der Regierung betrachtet werden, was sich in den Strukturen für die Förderung der Gesundheitsverbesserung widerspiegeln muss.

Die EUPHA vertritt heute eine beträchtliche Anzahl von europäischen Forschern, Experten und Fachkräften aus dem Bereich Public Health, deren Know-how für die Formulierung neuer politischer Strategien, die Umsetzung von Programmen und eine Reform der Praxis unabdingbar ist. Sie haben wiederholt aufgezeigt, dass die aktuellen Strukturen und Prozesse diesem neuen Umfeld nicht gerecht werden und dringend geändert werden müssen.

stitutions, national governments and international organisations with competences related to healthcare all over Europe. Health inequalities, in particular, represent an across-the-board challenge for healthcare and health that concerns all fields of public health, and we take it as a priority to lay bare the extent to which our society suffers from them and how better health policies (and even policies not strictly or explicitly related to health) could do wonders in reducing them and improving fairness in our everyday life.

THE FUTURE

We make it a point to create evidence, help translate it into practice, and make this translation as effective as possible in terms of the final goal of fostering the health status. There is no point in only supporting one of these stages. Adding value can therefore mean: ensuring the highest scientific rigor and severity when producing new evidence; bringing researchers and the results of their investigations into contact with practitioners and policy-makers, so that they can usefully orient each others' priorities and activities; and finally using that information, those strategies or those tools where appropriate, when appropriate and in the appropriate manner.

EUPHA works in close contact with the leading international organisations whose activities have relevance to public health. Authoritative representatives of WHO, EU, OECD are commonly guests of our Annual Conference. Several of our institutional members are charged by local, regional and national authorities to design interventions in specific fields of health-related policies, which fall within their remit. But very often we even go beyond that. For instance, EUPHA is preparing a workshop for the Ministerial Conference of the current Presidency of the European Union where we will present our viewpoint and a number of practical proposals on why Health Impact Assessment should be inserted into the agenda of the priorities of EU and on how to integrate it into directives and national legislation.

As EUPHA, we think that it is a priority today that both the general and the technical public realise that all policies, all laws, all behaviours by families and citizens have an impact on health. Health is not just a matter to be solved inside general practices and hospitals. Realising that, becoming aware that we can greatly improve general well-being by looking at the health consequences of all our personal and collective decisions, is a step in the right direction for the future of all Europeans. We will work to raise this awareness, and we are confident that we can achieve it.

An evolution is already ongoing. We mean to go beyond our traditional role as a pure provider of scientific evidence, because we have now gathered the experience and reached the critical mass necessary for that. The topics of our conferences have progressively converged to touch on the current affairs of Europe's public health. Contact with international organisations has become gradually closer. Communication has been improved with a series of tools that are allowing us to express EUPHA's viewpoint on current public health problems. The near future will therefore see EUPHA take on a more active role in shaping all policies with an impact on health by Europe's local, national and international institutions.

We believe that the future is not a place, like Rome or Vienna, awaiting our arrival; it is more like a beautiful bridge, something that we have to imagine, design, and build. If we do not build it, other people will. ■