



Challenges for Public Health at the Dawn of the 21st Century
A Call to Action - 9th International Congress
Beijing, China 6 September 2000

PREAMBLE

Participants in the 9th International Congress of the World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA¹), gathered in Beijing, China, 2-6 September 2000, call on public health leaders throughout the world to consolidate efforts around the common cause of social justice and to advance the goal of Health for All in the 21st Century.

This Call to Action comes at a critical point in our development as a global community. The millennium brings with it unprecedented opportunities and challenges, especially as related to achieving Health for All in this century.

It has been more than twenty years since the adoption of the Declaration of Alma Ata and the forging of an international commitment to achieving health for all people of the world with primary health care as the key approach. Since then there have been successful initiatives to strengthen global commitments to health, in areas such as human rights, women, children, food and nutrition and the environment. But the commitment to primary health care has at times been uncertain.

This Call to Action challenges individual and collective public health associations to translate current and future knowledge and skills into specific actions for the improved health of the global citizenship.

THE VISION BEHIND A CALL TO ACTION

Public health is an art and a science; it is also a movement, dedicated to the equitable improvement of health and well-being worldwide. First and foremost, public health leaders must be catalysts for the public health movement. In so doing, they must affirm the critical role of grassroots communities in achieving health goals. Individually and collectively around the world, public health leaders must maintain and strengthen their roles and capacities as advocates for public health in the 21st century.

THE CHALLENGES

We have experienced significant health gains over the past century, many brought about through public health measures: an increase in life expectancy, world wide reduction in infant and child mortality, and the elimination or reduction of many communicable diseases.

Critical health problems persist: widespread childhood malnutrition, high rates of maternal mortality and persisting burdens of tuberculosis, malaria and HIV/AIDS. Far too many of the world's people, the basic determinants of health, such as lack of safe water, secure housing and disparities in the distribution of social, economic and educational and other factors, are barriers to health and well being.

These compromise fundamental human rights and thwart efforts to achieve equity in the attainment of well-being for all people. These problems are also major obstacles to social and economic development and contribute to the instability of communities, societies and nation-states.

¹ The WFPHA is an international, non-governmental organization composed of 70 multidisciplinary public health associations. It is the only world-wide professional society representing and serving the broad field of public health.



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Public health interventions must address several key challenges to overcome persisting health problems over the coming decades:

1. Maintain and strengthen a focus on fairness, the reduction of disparities and the elimination of inequities in health, worldwide as a centre-piece of continuing health system development and reform;
2. Strengthen inter-sectoral collaboration across all sectors and at all levels of society to address those social, economic, political and environmental factors that are central to population health gains;
3. Take effective action on globalization as it affects access to health, technology, income and other goods among peoples of the world, and as it shapes maximum attainable health and improved solidarity within and between nation-states.

PUBLIC HEALTH VALUES

The achievement of Health for All is a moral quest founded upon intrinsic values. These values were reaffirmed by the International Congress and form the underpinnings of the Call to Action.

1. all people have the right to the highest attainable standard of health and health is a prerequisite for the full enjoyment of all other human rights;
2. public health can build on an ethical foundation that includes respect for persons in all matters relating to health and includes fairness or justice in seeking to reform health systems so as to ensure equity and human well-being;
3. public health efforts must contribute to reducing health inequities within and between populations, including inequities that follow from gender discrimination.

DIRECTIONS FOR ACTION

The way ahead requires focusing on specific measures. There are seven distinct directions for the work of public health associations over the next two decades:

1. Build on the potential power of communities to effectively address public health issues.
2. Strengthen leadership and human resources development, including a particular emphasis on involving youth.
3. Identify and support essential public health functions.
4. Advocate for and support an integrated, comprehensive approach to primary health care as the cornerstone for health system development on which personal health services and health promotion and diseases prevention are appropriately resourced.
5. Advocate for and implement responsible, accountable and open governance structures at all levels of health system and services delivery.
6. Engage in and support research and knowledge development and their applications.
7. Harness information technology, including its use in the advancement of knowledge and its dissemination and effective use



Implementation of these seven directions has to be done in the context of lessons learned since Alma Ata. These include:

1. A sustainable integrated primary health care approach to address health problems that can be flexible in responding to emergent health issues;
2. The context of health problems (financial, social, political, governance) is often the critical barrier to their resolution;
3. Action in the larger context, if successful, will usually embrace a wider range of problems with resultant greater health gains. However, such actions are often complex, face resistant interests and powers and may carry us into unfamiliar alliances and territories;
4. Gains are seldom achieved through independent action. Multiple interests are involved, requiring a convergence of skills and resources;
5. Gains on new terrain are often built on small scale, local commitments of concerned people. Global programs for global actions are desirable but must contain the flexibility and the capacity to address the needs and priorities of all countries and regions.

ACTION STEPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Advancing the seven directions for action requires leadership and commitment on the parts of WFPHA, its member organizations and international partners. To this end, the WFPHA role in championing a Call to Action includes:

Leadership and Advocacy for Health

WFPHA through a system of networking and exchange; extends support and encouragement to its members in helping them to address public health problems with limited resources.

Build Partnerships and Alliances with Others

Promote building of international coalitions on specific health concerns.

Form alliances with appropriate international organizations to address issues of common concern, and through communications improve understanding of matters of importance to the public's health.

Support Grassroots Movements for Public Health

Essential public health functions

Support the inclusion of essential public health functions as essential tools for implementing public health practice.

Primary health care

Encourage an integrated approach to primary health care as a solid basis for health system development including health promotion, disease prevention and personal health care, involving the full participation of communities.

Health care reform

Orient health care reform efforts toward responding to the needs of populations, particularly the poor and vulnerable, in ways that are fair and just. Develop criteria of fairness/justice to guide health care reform

Research

Coordinate and integrate national and international collaborative research efforts to address health problems of the public, with a concern for ethical aspects of research involving human subjects.



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Human Resources for Health

Respect and support the role of communities and public health workers. Invest in education and training in relation to individual and professional development

Community

Work with communities in support of the work they do to redress inequities and create healthy places in which to live, work and play.

CONCLUSION

The WFPHA, its member organizations, international and national partners, and men and women from all walks of life who share the vision of Health for All, must set their sights on things as they might become. There are sharp points of obligation and commitment. Achieving the vision of Health for All is only possible if the aspirations for the future can be matched with the necessary human and financial resources to get the job done.

With this Call to Action, we raise our expectations of ourselves to achieve Health for All.