GUEST EDITORIAL

# ENHANCING PROFESSIONALISM IN PUBLIC HEALTH

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## INTRODUCTION

Franklin's aphorism *"Public health is public wealth"* in the Report of the Royal Sanitary Commission 1871, remains true to date[1]. Public health measures have contributed to many of the major improvements in the health of people. In the Malaysian scenario, control of epidemic diseases, safe food and water, and maternal and child health services are some of the noteworthy public health achievements that have prevented countless deaths and improved the quality of Malaysian life.

The importance of public health focusing on health, functioning and well-being is well documented in the Malaysian Vision for Health[2]. The latter provides the impetus for public health professionals to advance and thereby contribute towards the development of the Malaysian healthcare system. The new paradigm of health requires a re-look to the concept of health and healthcare, and the model of the future health system in the country[3,4,5]. With the emphasis on maintaining individuals in a state of health as long as possible, the best approach to healthcare is one that focuses on personal and community responsibility for health. To do this, the health system needs to provide information and education to individuals, and to provide access to a wide range of promotive and preventive activities, directed at reducing disease morbidity. Continuity of care across settings and episodes of care will be an essential feature and patients will be more involved in their own care. Outcome assessment will be the ultimate measure of quality in health, instituting greater healthcare providers' accountability.

What all this means is that the health system of the future will be different from what we are familiar with today.

## DEFINING PUBLIC HEALTH

Early public health focuses on sanitation measures and the control of communicable diseases[6]. With the discovery of bacteria and immunological advances, disease prevention was added to the subject matter of public health. Charkes-Edward A. Winslow[7] defined public health as: "the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life, and promoting physical health and efficiency through organised community efforts for the sanitation of the environment, the control of community infection, the education of individuals in principles of personal hygiene, and the organisation of medical and nursing service for the early diagnosis and preventive treatment of disease".

In recent years, the definition of public health focuses on positive health, emphasising a person's complete well-being[8]. However, in 1988, the Institute of Medicine (IOM)[9], in its report on the Future of Public Health proposed a challenging definition: "Public health is what we, as a society, do collectively to assure the conditions for people to be healthy". The IOM's perspective has been seen in the same light by others[10,11]. This definition emphasises on cooperative and mutually shared obligation; reinforcing that collective entities take responsibility for the health of the population. What this means is that there are many healthy activities individuals can do to safeguard their health such as eating healthy foods, exercising, using safety equipment, or refraining from smoking. However, there are areas where individuals, on their own cannot do to secure their health and they need to organise, work together and share their resources to create sustainable community activities[12].

In sum, the evolution in defining public health brings us to the understanding that what unites people around public health is the focus on society as a whole, the community, and the aim of attaining optimal health status. Thus, real health cannot be delivered by the government; it must be achieved through the personal effort of individuals, families and communities.

The focus of public health is on the reduction of health inequalities by optimising the underlying determinants of health and preventing disease. It is an integral part of human development and not simply the technical process by which health professionals deliver the services[13]. It is a social and political process that involves people and enables them to take better control over their own health. It also acknowledges that the health of individuals and communities depends on healthy environments. It requires the capacity to monitor population health and to use the results of the analysis in the development of a health policy, strategy and management. It exercises its responsibility to serve the public's interest in the development of comprehensive public health policies by promoting the use of scientific knowledge in decision-making vis-a-vis public health. Legislation is exercised through enforcement to protect the public's health.

[1] *Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia*

These are the essential or core functions of public health[14].

## PROFESSIONALISM AND THE PUBLIC HEALTH PROFESSION

Professionalism implies the mastery of a body of technical knowledge and the ability to apply that knowledge to a variety of situations by independent thought and analysis[15]. The word "professes" is important, because in this way a professional becomes dedicated to service. Thus, a professional in public health is required to have the command of a body of knowledge and skills, not only in the understanding of the structure and function of the human body but also the effects of external factors such as the environment on health. Understanding the patterns of distribution and risk factors for disease in whole populations will be of great use to those involved in the field of public health.

The *deliverance* of public health functions involves not only the activities of many different government and non-government agencies but also a number of different professional disciplines, working in a team. Besides the public health physicians, who are medical specialists in this area, they include those in the nursing profession, the health education officers, environmental health inspectors, education experts, town and country planners, architects, engineers and others. Aptly, the public health physician with his/her basic medical background and post-graduate qualification in public health will be the appropriate person to lead the multi-disciplinary public health team.

Medical knowledge and skills have expanded at an unprecedented rate. This, together with the revolution in information technology, the impending changes in the healthcare system of the country, and the impact of globalisation and liberalisation, has huge implications for the public health profession. The most upfront challenge is the leadership ability, as the 21st century represents the opening of health markets to a wide variety of providers and organisations.

To assume a quality leadership role, a public health leader must not only have a clear vision of what he or she wants to achieve, but must also ensure that this vision remains with him or her despite setbacks[16]. The Malaysian Vision for Health has set clear goals that can be encapsulated by public health leaders.

Leaders in public health are technically competent and possess wide experiences in the subject matter. They are trained in public health and aim to earn the respect of the entire profession. They lead the profession with vast experience in the provision of health care, in medical education and research, and in the international arena. As a leader, attributes such as credibility, the ability to take responsibility, integrity, self-belief and realism, or pragmatism are tenets that enhance his or her reputation.

Public health is not just about *technical management* but also about the management of a *social machinery*. Public health professionals not only work within their own organisations, but also with an array of organisations in other sectors. Hence, appropriate corporate skills are imperative[16]. This allows them to be opportunistic and able to analyse the corporate structures and power bases, adapting to and working within a given corporate style. At the same time they will be able to set, monitor and work towards achieving organisational goals, remaining accountable for work undertaken, understanding the formal and informal decision-making process, and understanding relationships both within and between other agencies that influence healthcare. Such skills are essential in enhancing their competency in building constituencies for public health[17,18].

More than often it is the public health crises and not public health successes that usually make headlines in the media. Very often crises, hot issues, and the concerns of organized interest groups drive decision-making in public health. Like other settings, decisions are made largely based on competitions, bargaining, and influence rather than comprehensive analysis. Such being the case, public health leaders must also have the influencing and negotiating skills beyond the immediate environment[16,17]. They should have the ability to handle the media and mastering multiple communication styles and vocabularies, including written skills[16].

*Bioethics* is a new area in the medical profession that needs to be developed. Ethics is understood to be "a search for those values, virtues, and principles necessary for people to live together in peace, mutual respect, and justice[19]". Public health ethics can be appreciated from the following perspectives[12, 19]:

1. ethics *of* public health or professional ethics, where the concern is with the ethical dimensions of professionalism and the moral trust that society bestows on public health professionals to act for the common welfare;
2. ethics *in* public health or applied ethics, where the concern is with the ethical dimensions of the public health enterprise itself, for example the creation of pubic health policies; and
3. ethics *for* public health or advocacy ethics, where the public health authorities put forward what they think is ethically appropriate, and their function is to advocate the social goal.

Accountability is an important value that should never be disregarded by those in this field. Accountability is "the procedure and process by which one party provides a justification and is held

responsible for its action by another party who has an interest in the action[20]". There is an increasing demand and pressure for public health professionals to be accountable both to the affected populations, the potential "beneficiaries" and to their paymasters.

Public health has had great difficulty accommodating itself to political dynamics. Politics is unavoidable but necessary[19]. It is unavoidable because it is about making decisions for distribution of limited resources to differing competing constituencies[21]. Politics is a necessary component to achieve public health policies and practices consistent with our traditions and values.

Current debates regarding evidence-based medicine and evidence-based policy have permeated all spheres of health care. Effective public health actions must be based on accurate knowledge of the causes and distribution of health problems and of effective interventions. There are still significant knowledge gaps for many public health problems, requiring the support of research. As we are experiencing more changes in the healthcare system now than in the previous decades, it is crucial to see the role of research in public health, not only as a means of providing knowledge, but also as an integral part of public health development.

*Law and enforcement* have also been a struggle to public health professionals. Public health is one of the few professions that has legal power – in particular, the police power of the state, behind it[19]. Using law, the public health professionals can coerce citizens into behaving in some health way. Hence, it is essential that public health professionals do have the knowledge, skills and resources to carry through this function.

The *Internet* is transforming health care. In working with telehealth strategies, it offers the services of professionals and organisations to a new revolution in health care. The public health professions of the future will increasingly become information experts and brokers, where there will be widespread availability of information and they will be challenged to interpret the information in their work environment[22]. This is a big challenge, both for the professionals and for the organisations they work in, to effectively manage knowledge in this era of information revolution[23].

## MEETING THE CHALLENGES

The victory in meeting these challenges lies in the willingness to change, both by the public health professionals and others involved in the development of the profession. Enhancing professionalism in public health requires investment in time, planning and resources.

Public health professionals should equip themselves with sound technical knowledge and skills in epidemiology and biostatistics. They must also be exposed to extraneous subject matter such as bioethics, history, sociology, political science, laws and other disciplines that are bound to have an influence in the development and management of public health. Making continuous learning, reading and writing as the culture of sharing by every public health professional would enhance their ability to continuously update and keep abreast with recent developments in public health and to develop a network with other professions.

Numerous avenues are already available for public health professionals to capitalise upon. They include, among others, scientific seminars, public forums, journals and the media. With a strong background of epidemiology and biostatistics, searching for and gathering data and information to support decision-making should be second nature to all public health professionals. Hence, research can be a valuable investment to support the development of public health professions.

Public health leaders must take the limelight in their day-to-day activities. They should lead from the front, exercising their leadership skills not only in the areas of technical subject matters, but also in corporate management, and have negotiating and influencing skills.

Academic institutions too, have a major role to play in supporting the development of public health professionals. The conceptual shift in health development has important and practical implications to modify the traditional "diagnose and treat" medical education model to one that emphasises health promotion, prevention and the complexities of disease causation[24,25]. The introduction of experiential learning and the use of mentoring, working within the academic institutions and secondment outside to establish firm links with state and local health departments, is a commendable move made by many academic institutions. The move provides the opportunity to integrate a variety of learning techniques, providing new perspectives to public health and links into the wider development agenda in the training of public health professionals in the country.

Beyond teaching, academicians have also a major role to play as significant resources to the government in the development of public health policies and programmes. Research by the academicians should range from basic research in fields related to public health, through applied research and development, to programme evaluation and implementation research.

## CONCLUSION

Although science has provided a foundation for public health, social values have shaped the system[10]. The paradigm and boundaries of public health have changed over time and new challenges await the public health professions, not only in managing diseases but also in areas such as social problems, political, economic and ideological shifts within the government and the nation.

We need more and better-trained public health professionals to meet the new challenges. We should identify and train the leaders of tomorrow in the attitudes, knowledge and skills of high-level leadership, to enable them to step into the limelight and lead from the front.

Developing the health system of the future will require enormous changes. Our paradigm of health and healthcare will have to change and the health system will have to be reorganised, and so will the educational orientation for public health specialists and other public health professionals, to meet the challenges in public health. Research works are urgently needed to support the development of new models, systems, strategies and work processes in the health system.

To sum up, the common theme in enhancing professionalism in public health is change. As Alvin Toffler said, "change is not merely necessary to life, it is life". This idea was further supported by the Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair, who commented "it is not reform that is the enemy of public services. It's the status quo"[26].

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