

WORKSHOP 5

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EXCHANGING EXPERIENCE: HOW CAN SCHOOLS OF PUBLIC HEALTH ENGAGE WITH THE WIDER COMMUNITY

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Purpose

Public health is, ultimately, about making the world a better place. This means that schools of public health must engage effectively with the communities among which they exist. They must be both proactive, for example by drawing attention to issues that would otherwise be overlooked or ignored, such as the needs of disadvantaged communities, and reactive, responding to the issues identified by communities and their leaders. Only in this way will schools of public health ensure their continued relevance in the twentieth century. This workshop seeks to provide a forum through which ASPHER members can exchange experiences, both positive and negative. It will begin with a presentation setting out the issues, drawing widely on experiences of academic-community involvement, and highlighting why this issue is important. This will introduce concepts such as lay epidemiology and will examine the role of narratives in complementing epidemiological research. Then will follow a series of brief presentations of practical experiences that will provide the basis for a wider discussion among those present about how to move forward.

The workshop will focus in particular on the skills that are required for this role, including how to tackle controversial and contested issues, especially when they feature in the media spotlight, how to engage in advocacy, and how to identify, enlist and develop key stakeholders. In particular it will explore how to overcome forces that are hostile to public health, such as the tobacco industry and, in some cases, the food industry.

It is anticipated that the output of the workshop will be a paper to be published in a public health journal.

Objectives

The objective of the workshop is to distil the experiences of ASPHER members in engaging with their communities, so as to produce a report for publication that will provide generalisable lessons.

Exchanging experience: How can schools of Public Health engage with the wider community?

Martin McKee and Ted Tulchinsky

The workshop was introduced by Martin McKee and Ted Tulchinsky. Each gave a presentation providing examples of how schools of public health can engage with the wider world to contribute to the policy agenda. Martin McKee began by drawing on examples in the area of tobacco policy. One was where a major hospital had decided to build a suite of rooms for patients to smoke in, following a major rebuilding programme in which open spaces at the end of old wards had disappeared. He highlighted:

- the importance of rapid action, in this case drawing attention to the issue by a letter to the local media;
- involving others, in this case asking colleagues from other countries to also write to the newspapers;
- providing an evidence-based alternative, in this case by means of an editorial in the British Medical Journal that drew together the evidence for the effectiveness of policies to stop smoking in hospitals.

His second presentation looked at the role of the public health professional as an investigator, showing how he and Swiss colleagues had exposed a secret testing plant operated in Germany by Philip Morris. This involved detailed study of internal tobacco industry documents released under US court orders. A key figure in this story was a Swedish professor of Environmental Health, who sued for libel and lost. The main messages were:

- The importance of taking a stand, even when confronted with powerful opposing forces;
- The importance of marshalling the evidence carefully.

The remaining examples highlighted the importance of concerted international action, for example working to support staff in the US Congress who are seeking to expose the corruption of scientific evidence by the administration of President George W Bush.

Ted Tulchinsky's presentation looked at a series of areas where schools of public health could make a difference but where only a few had done so. He began by discussing the nature of evidence, citing John Last's definition "*Application of the best available evidence in public health policies and practices.. derived from epidemiologic, demographic, sociologic, economic and other relevant sources, preferably published, peer-reviewed, and critically appraised articles and reports.*"

He set out a series of principles for action:

- Identify population health problems
- Assess the evidence for effective intervention
- Define the case for action
- Identify objectives and targets
- Spell out intervention programs
- Enlist support

He then illustrated these points with a series of case studies. The problems addressed should be those that are amenable to action, such as prevention of cervical cancer, birth defects, and effective detection and treatment of hypertension. He noted that each campaign does not require a new systematic review of the evidence. There is

already much available in “gold standards” guidelines that is not acted on. A major challenge is to make decision makers, the media, and the public realize there is a problem and something that can be done about it, a point he illustrated with the case of food fortification. However, even when these groups become aware it is necessary to fight lethargy and inertia. He called for resistance to what he described as “zombies” i.e. old dead stories that keep coming back, such as some of the fears associated with immunization. Finally he emphasized the importance of national standards and guidelines as a basis for evidence.

An active discussion followed. There was a sense that schools of public health could do more, but they were often inhibited by a variety of factors that included lack of time, lack of confidence to tackle powerful vested interests, a potential conflict with the governments that provided their funding, a fear of being seen as political, and a sense of isolation. On the other hand, there were many examples of local successes.

There was a widespread acceptance that many schools of public health needed to provide better training in advocacy. This is an issue that will be addressed in a series of seminars that will be conducted in Salzburg over the next three years, funded by the American Austrian Foundation, to which staff from schools of public health will be invited.