

Moving beyond traditional boundaries of health: Public health and multi-sectoral integration

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In her May 16, 2011 address to the World Health Assembly, WHO Director-General Margaret Chan enumerated health improvements occurring worldwide, from the development and dissemination of a new vaccine for meningitis to declines in maternal mortality. With all that is being accomplished, however, she demonstrated courageous leadership in saying, “Health clearly speaks with a louder voice, but still carries a small stick when it comes to shaping the way this world works.” The voice of health is in fact more audible than it has been in the past. The Obama Administration’s FY2012 budget proposal, for example, has requested \$9.8 billion for the Global Health Initiative, a 10% increase above FY 2011 levels and 17% increase over FY 2009 levels. Funding for global health, as well as its visibility, is growing with foundations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Bloomberg Family Foundation directing the spotlight onto health issues worldwide.

Nevertheless, health as a consideration in public policy outside of explicit health domains remains overlooked. The major challenges of the 21st century do not fall neatly into the category of health. Climate change, which will have major effects on the distribution of diseases and availability of food and water, is a result of activities in the manufacturing, trade, energy, and transportation sectors. Rising food prices pose a grave threat to the world’s poor and will require changes in agriculture and energy policy and financial markets to avoid mass stunting and wasting. The globalizing economy, international trade and development, and global security and conflict all have important health implications. Unfortunately, the ability of the public health community to clearly and ably communicate positions that support health-enhancing policies and practices is lacking, allowing the interests of

other actors to drown out health-related concerns. Increasing the number of tobacco control activists, for example, whose scope of work includes influencing the U.S. Department of Commerce or the U.S. Trade Representative vis-à-vis the tobacco industry is important to slow the spread of tobacco-related disease worldwide.

The challenge of non-communicable diseases – in particular, those related to obesity, tobacco use, and physical activity – demonstrates how even the health-specific challenges of the future are impacted by the policies and actions of other sectors. The ultimate burden of non-communicable diseases falls on the health care system, but the distal causes of these diseases include evolving agriculture practices, manufacturing processes, marketing of goods, and international trade policies. The private sector, multinational corporations in particular, will play a pivotal role in how non-communicable diseases are dealt with, though specific roles depend on the industry in question. While the tobacco industry should have no influence on tobacco control efforts, the food and beverage industries may be key partners in advancing public health. Solutions to the growing global epidemic of non-communicable diseases will emerge only through involvement of a diverse array of stakeholders in these sectors.

Very few health issues fall solely within the province of health departments and public health practitioners anymore. As emerging diseases and health priorities evolve into global and multi-sectoral issues, public health professionals – from interventionists to advocates to researchers – must step outside of their silos. Dialogue and collaboration have become en

vogue terms within public health practice. Community-academic partnerships, community based participatory research, and translational research are efforts to overcome traditional barriers within public health but the future effectiveness and impact of public health will be determined not by how well professionals in the field work with each other, but with a more diverse set of stakeholders in other sectors. Speaking knowledgably about our areas of expertise will no longer be sufficient. What will be required is a deep understanding and ability to address the vested interests of varied actors, whose interests may be in stark contrast to those of the public's health. We then must persuade

them to act in the public, as well as their own, interest.

WHO Director-General Chan continued in her address to the World Health Assembly that "public health is operating in a world of enormous and constantly changing complexity," envisioning a new WHO that "works with other sectors to address health risks that threaten the health and stability of societies." In order to provide valued and respected input on the health challenges before us, this vision should be shared and embodied by all public health professionals.