



MEETING OF DIRECTORS OR REPRESENTATIVES
OF SCHOOLS OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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STATEMENT ON DEVELOPMENT IN
PUBLIC HEALTH TEACHING

by

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On behalf of Dr. Alfred Quenum, Regional Director of the World Health Regional Office for Africa, I am very pleased to convey my warmest greetings to this Meeting on Public Health Teaching and to express our hope that any new developments in the field of public health should be taken into consideration, with a view to adapting the traditional curriculum to our present needs.

At the Conference of Directors of Schools of Public Health, organized by the World Health Organization in Geneva, from 29 August to 2 September 1966, the Director General emphasized that many of the post-graduate courses in public health are given in countries that are well developed socially and economically and have advanced public health organizations and major public health problems which are different from those of the students' countries. Nevertheless, in the DPH/MPH courses, students acquire knowledge of work and organization; they grasp general principles and concepts which enable them to reach satisfactory performance of their subsequent careers¹.

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¹ Wld. Hlth. Org. techn. Rep. Ser. 1967, 351.

The institutions providing post-graduate courses in public health differ widely. Some emphasize training, others service to the community, others research. The curricula are therefore not the same everywhere.

In addition, there are institutions devoted to a single post-graduate course for physicians, while many also accept members of other professions, like veterinarians, dentists, nurses, engineers, administrators, sociologists etc. Anyway, the working definition of a school of public health given in the tenth report of the WHO Expert Committee on Professional and Technical Education of Medical and Auxiliary Personnel is still appropriate:

"An institution with adequate resources which, in addition to research in public health and service to the community, provides a full-time course lasting not less than one academic year, or its equivalent, covering the subjects essential to the understanding of the various problems of public health and the concepts, organization and techniques required for dealing with them, and which is open to members of the medical and allied professions seeking qualifications in public health.¹"

This definition is to be reviewed in the light of the growing needs associated with under-development in most countries of Latin America, Asia and Africa.

In the African Region, the major concern is the total coverage of the population as far as medical care and preventive medicine are concerned. In view of the existing conditions in the field of communicable diseases, malnutrition, environmental health and the tremendous problems related to them, Dr. Alfred Quenum, Regional Director, stressed, at the first meeting of professors of public health from Medical Schools in the Region held at the Regional Office in Brazzaville from 7 to 12 October 1968, that special attention should be given to adaptation of curricula to the African needs and context and that a new concept of the team should be materialized with a view to further promotion in the community health.

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Wld. Hlth. Org. techn. Rep. Ser. 1961, 216, 4-5.

2. The health needs in African Region

2.1 The total coverage in the field of public health is our final objective.

Up to now, the greatest part of medical care has been devoted to the cities and urban areas in view of the location of the hospitals and related facilities. The rural areas appear to be abandoned in their isolation, poverty and scarcity of medical care and preventive medicine.

2.2 The acute shortage of health personnel of all categories, the poor doctors/population ratio and the lack of training institutions are among the major concern of the African Region.

2.3 The prevalence of communicable diseases - heading a long list of epidemic and endemic diseases are malaria, schistosomiasis, onchocerciasis, cerebrospinal meningitis, yaws, leprosy, measles etc.

2.4 Malnutrition and kwashiorkor - these conditions in infants contribute largely to the morbidity and mortality and are closely related to socio-cultural status and low economic pattern.

To meet the needs, the training of health personnel deserves high priority. In such planning, attention is always focussed on the problem of adaptation of the traditional curricula to the African context, taking into account the basic requirements with regard to local pathology and epidemiology.

The post-graduate courses should be reviewed in the light of those requirements. It is necessary, therefore, to effect changes in the curricula so that greater attention is given to subjects such as epidemiology, sociology, anthropology, religion, vital statistics, occupational hygiene, environmental health and health education.

As far as teaching methodology is concerned, more seminars and group discussions would be beneficial to the students.

3. Training in field projects:

The field programmes, should be suitably reorganized to ensure that they are really practical.

4. Research programme in public health:

The minimum of research as pointed out by Dr. J.S.W. Lutwama at the recent Meeting of Professors of Public Health in Brazzaville, depends largely on the funds and personnel available and the co-operation between the schools of public health and other medical faculties or University institutions.

The major areas of the research programme should include the following main subjects:

Communicable diseases, maternal and child health, environmental health, vital statistics and nursing.

Epidemiological analysis should be encouraged in the methodology of research.

5. CONCLUSION

It is now largely agreed that the traditional pattern of curricula and methodology must be reviewed.

It is obvious that the acute shortage of health personnel could only be met by establishing schools of public health in the African Region. However, this is not immediately feasible in view of the lack of resources and personnel.

The training in public health should emphasize the new concept of the team and should take into account the objectives and the tasks which are to be performed by the different categories of health personnel at the central (ministries) and peripheral levels (basic health services).