

## Knowledge and Competence for Public Health

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Most societies lack a sufficiently comprehensive, interdisciplinary and multisectoral system of (New) Public Health. This insight has led many countries to invest more than in the past into epidemiological and health services research and into education and training programmes for the New Public Health. Worldwide a growing demand for qualified personnel both in public health management and public health research can be observed.

The term *New Public Health* refers to a complex pattern of functions and related organisational infrastructures serving the health of the people in all segments of society. For practical purposes it is useful to distinguish three main public health functions:

- a *political function* serving the health needs of society as a whole through effective health care and health promotion programmes or, in the language of WHO, policies directed towards a „*sustainable health for all*“;
- a *knowledge function* providing health professions, health workers and the general public with relevant health information and knowledge, both scientific and experience-based;
- a control or *management function* aiming at the effective organisation and functioning of the main health sectors, i.e. Health Care, Health Promotion and the provision of services and products relevant to health.

Public Health can be seen as the „third pillar“ on which any well functioning health system must rest. This pillar was seriously neglected in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when compared with the other two pillars, namely hospital care and ambulatory health care. Today, many experts see Public Health still at a cross-road. But most would agree that in order to cope with the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, all countries must develop a strong, knowledge-based and professionally managed system of New Public Health.

A large body of research and experience suggests that public health development must be guided by two strategic goals:

- 1) *Reorientation, co-ordination and professional management of medical and nursing care*  
*The aim of this strategy is to enable and support ambulatory and hospital care organisations to improve the quality of their services both by adopting targeted, knowledge or evidence-based and outcome-oriented strategies and methods, and by establishing patient-oriented networks for a continuing management of health care services;*
- 2) *Development, organisation and professional management of health promotion and prevention*  
*The aim of this effort is to enable and support social settings, especially regions and communities as well as schools, workplaces and health care organisations, to plan and conduct need-based and professionally managed health promotion and prevention programmes and to build sustainable organisational infra-structures and partnerships.*

If it is a societal goal to achieve a sustainable health for all people it is essential to reorient health policies and programmes towards a better balance between health promotion and health care. The key players and stakeholders within the health system - political parties and sickness funds, health care providers and professional organisations, scientific communities and training institutions - must actively support the New Public Health. To build a variety of high quality, inter-disciplinary and multi-sectoral education and training programmes will be the most important and least debatable investment into the New Public Health.

Postgraduate education and training for a new public health will qualify people with medical, social science and other appropriate backgrounds for expert and leadership roles in several fields: health care and health promotion management, policy making, funding and quality control, scientific research, evaluation and training. Depending on the particular field, public health experts will need a specific combination of the following competencies:

- *Self-competence*, e.g. self-assurance, reflectiveness and appropriate coping skills;
- *Social competence*. e.g. adequate skills to communicate, to critically appraise, to mediate or to resolve conflicts;
- *Strategic competence*, e.g. good problem-solving skills, management skills and the ability to engage in life-long independent learning;
- *Scientific competence* both
  - in the population health sciences (epidemiology, health sociology, health economics, health law and health psychology) and
  - in the organisational or management sciences (sociology of organisations, management theory, health systems research, health and patient management, health policy and planning, health care financing and control).

For those interested in a professional education and training programme in Public Health a number of opportunities are available today. Many students choose a postgraduate programme offered by Schools of Public Health in the United States, the United Kingdom or in some other English-speaking countries. During the last ten years universities in Germany and Switzerland have established over a dozen new Master's level programmes (*Master of Public Health/M.P.H. or Master of Science./M.Sc.*) Most universities in the United States, the United Kingdom and a few universities in certain European countries also offer Doctoral or *Ph.D.* programmes.

For those interested in a less advanced and shorter programme some of the Austrian universities offer special courses (Universitätslehrgänge) in selected fields of Health Care Management, Community Health or Health Promotion.

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