



The Federation's Pages

WFPHA: World Federation of Public Health Associations

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The Future of Public Health: Engaging Students and Young Professionals

Introduction

In 2017, the World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA) celebrated its 50th anniversary. In these 50 years, the world has witnessed tremendous public health accomplishments including reductions in child mortality, access to safe water and sanitation, disease prevention and control through immunization programs, and the promotion of health including anti-tobacco education [1]. WFPHA celebrated some of these accomplishments at the World Congress on Public Health in April 2017 in Melbourne, Australia [2].

In many parts of the world, societies and individuals struggle to cope with the prevalent public health challenges of the past 50 years—just as a new wave of public health challenges is emerging. Antimicrobial resistance, climate change, and unprecedented population movements are pushing modern public health leaders to be more responsive to these global health threats. As we look forward to the next 50 years, those who are students and young professionals (SYPs) in public health today will need to meet these challenges by exploiting opportunities and taking on the questions that an increasingly digital and globalized world puts forth. Here, we consider the issue of engaging students and young professionals (SYPs) in the field of public health to be better prepared to confidently become future leaders. The

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recommendations we present in this paper represent the culmination of 2 years of work by a project group of 20 SYPs who conducted a scoping survey, a workshop in Melbourne at the World Congress on Public Health in 2017, and proposed a final recommendations survey based on responses to the initial ‘scoping survey’ (a preliminary study to define the scope of a project). We present the recommendations for consideration in the context of the Global Charter on the Public’s Health [3] and offer insight into matters that SYPs judge to be important. We call for uptake of the recommendations by the member associations of the WFPHA, and public health organizations more broadly. We put the recommendations forward here to guide efforts of all such organizations to meaningfully engage SYP members by addressing their needs, to encourage greater of young talent in many aspects of public health.

Recommendations and action plan

Establish and foster both formal and informal opportunities for mentorship relationships

The project group identified the need for establishing more formal and informal opportunities for mentoring relationships. A publicly available database of professionals who would like to become mentors should be created so that SYPs can easily identify whom to approach for mentorship and guidance in their areas of interest. Mentorship programs can help foster new relationships, leadership attributes, and a new generation of public health leaders across the world. Public health organizations can institute mentorship opportunities through formal programs, or informal opportunities such as one-off events. Formal mentorship programs are likely to increase mentorship capacity of students included and provide future opportunities for both mentor and mentees’ professional development. Mentors can assist mentees to better understand the myriad of problems public health practitioners’ encounter, the many disciplines that can help solve them, while connecting SYPs with opportunities for growth. Mentorship should be a two-way relationship, with mentors also benefiting from the knowledge and energy of mentees. Supportive, healthy relationships formed between mentors and mentees should provide positive, immediate, long-term, and lasting impact on both parties. At the start of their careers, SYPs may feel overwhelmed or suffer from ‘impostor syndrome,’ a sense where people are unable to internalize a sense of accomplishment and perceive themselves as less competent than others. Senior public health professionals can help SYPs alleviate this discomfort by opening ways for SYPs to voice their ideas and lead initiatives with the support of mentors. To maximize meaningful mentor–mentee relationships, SYPs should be supported to foster mentorship opportunities on their own accord.



Ensuring meaningful and fair representation of SYPs at multiple levels throughout public health organizations

The project group identified formal representation by SYPs as a key priority. Representation should be more meaningful and visible at multiple levels of public health organizations. SYPs are more than merely learners, and may have a lot to offer in terms of knowledge and resources. They should be encouraged to recognize that they have a voice and important contributions to offer. Organizations should ensure active roles for SYPs on their boards of directors and in event planning committees. These roles should include collaborative contributions by SYPs, as well as senior professionals to the organization including leadership and development workshops and training, networking opportunities, and conference planning. SYPs are ready and eager to engage at multiple levels within public health organizations, not just at desk duties. Beyond representation of SYPs, it will be important for the organizations to continually evaluate racial, origin, culture, gender, and age diversity to ensure broad and equitable representation of SYP perspectives. Organizations should define career development action plans for graduate and entry level positions, and provide young staff a mentor to ensure development is on track. Representation of SYPs should benefit mutually both parties as SYPs provide unique perspectives to benefit the organizations and population health. Early engagement should ensure that SYPs will develop into the best possible public health leaders.

Increase opportunities for SYPs to attend events, including conferences and training activities

The project group also identified that increasing opportunities to participate in public health conferences and training activities will be an important avenue for promoting engagement of SYPs. This could take the form of free or significantly discounted registrations as well as access to scholarships to support travel and other costs of participation. We understand there are limitations on funding for public health conferences and training activities, thus it will require creativity to increase SYP participation within the realm of what is feasible. Barriers to conference attendance for SYPs are pronounced for international conferences, as the costs tend to be higher than for in-country activities. Attending conferences and other training activities can be especially beneficial to the development of SYPs because they provide opportunities to network with people in their intended fields, learning opportunities, professional development, and exposure to broader understanding of the context of public health. The project group identified ways to improve SYP attendance in conferences: crowdfunding, volunteer work in exchange for registration, and collaboration with host organizations and universities to provide funding for SYP attendance. More senior professionals and well-funded organizations could consider donating funds to help cover the cost of a registration for SYP colleagues. Increasing representation in conferences of SYP from low-middle income will require special determination.



Profile and promote the breadth of careers within the public health field

The project group also assigned high priority to promotion of a broad view of breadth of the field of public health across multiple disciplines. Public health is often medicalized, downplaying the focus on protection and prevention strategies to benefit populations. This often results in overemphasis of diseases, curative strategies, and the role of medical professionals, leading to the underemphasis of other non-medical preventative strategies and interventions. This could lead to discouraging people with other sorts of backgrounds (e.g., sanitarians, scientists, nutritionists, teachers, social workers, urbanists, engineers, and many others) from pursuing work in the field of public health, although major improvement for the health of populations lies in innovation to prevent disease and injury. Failure to showcase the full breadth of opportunities for engaging young talent in careers to advance population health limits the pool of potential employees to those already with a public health focus. Universities should teach in areas beyond the conventional medical approach to public health to encourage SYPs to explore the breadth of the field. Organizations in other fields could sponsor public health-related roles, as can public health organizations. Public health policies require the effort and will of many stakeholders, as is articulated in the Global Charter on the Public's Health. Graduate programs should focus on the many sources of support for public health activities—including the public sector, the not-for-profit sector, and the civil advocacy sector. To create more job opportunities for SYPs, organizations and universities should promote a broader variety of roles, and inform students about interdisciplinary opportunities in the public health beyond those with medical training. Public health teaching and training should reflect the growing understanding that public health politics require multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary approaches to address effectively the many health problems. Training needs to include roles specifically effective in low- and middle-income countries, taking into account the opportunities and challenges experienced in these roles and political climates in the many and varied settings.

Create and disseminate equitable public health opportunities for SYPs

The project group identified that a key factor for engaging SYPs in public health is creation and dissemination of opportunities for exposure to and experience in public health. SYPs have the potential to increase productivity, inject fresh ideas, increase visibility of organizations among their peers, and often actively join such organizations later in their careers. Creation of internships and volunteer positions can provide SYPs with hands-on public health experience while they are studying, and help them build their skills for future employment. New effort is needed to assure these opportunities will be accessible and feasible for SYPs of all income levels and background—not just those from high-income settings. Where possible, remuneration in some way will be important to ensure that SYPs are not pushed into greater financial debt at the start of their careers. SYPs would like to see more field- and practice-oriented opportunities, as opposed to desk-based internships. Additionally, the advertisement of opportunities through a reliable, streamlined database



could eliminate exploitation of SYPs who may not yet have the experience and know-how to self-navigate through the levels of organizations and institutions.

The Global Charter on the Public's Health

WFPHA developed the Global Charter on the Public's Health in 2015–2016 in collaboration with the World Health Organization [3]. It serves as the guiding document for the public health work of the WFPHA and numerous organizations worldwide. The recommendations we presented here as the SYP-Working Group strongly support working in public health using the framework of the global charter. SYPs represent a key set of stakeholders for developing the agenda for future work of public health including protection of populations, disease prevention, and health promotion. The global charter presents 'capacity' as a key component to advancing public health. The five recommendations presented in this report represent key priorities for building public health capacity through the engagement of SYPs in public health.

The students and young professionals (SYPs) in public health today will become the leaders of tomorrow. Early engagement is the most effective way to ensure that SYPs develop into the best possible future leaders. We hope that the recommendations presented here will provide actionable evidence for public health organizations to increase their engagement of SYPs. The SYP-Working Group will continue to engage with public health organizations and associations to develop action plans and help disseminate the recommendations of this report and facilitate their adoption. With effective engagement of SYPs, public health organizations can ensure this outcome transpires through the development of the next generation of public health professionals.

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