INCREASING ROLE OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health broadly, as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity [1]. Over the years there has been considerable progress in controlling disease and extending life span. Even so, there remains a strong need for further progress, especially in other critical aspects of health such as quality of life, equity, and social justice in health. Such progress requires an increased role, and an increased awareness and perception, of public health.

During the late 19th and 20th centuries, public health consisted largely of interventions to prevent and control of outbreaks and epidemics of infectious disease scourges like plague, cholera, and yellow fever. Application of sanitary measures was an important component of these interventions. At present, however, public health must be considered as much more than disease prevention and control. Its purview should be broadened to include and promote all aspects of health under WHO's definition. Its role should also be strengthened to enable effective achievement of health for all. Thus, public health should be considered and adopted as an important strategy that contributes vitally to this ultimate goal.

The WHO World Health Assembly of 1977 was a very important turning point in global health. The Assembly "decided that the main social target of governments and of WHO should be the attainment by all the people of the world … of a level of health that would permit them to lead a socially and economically productive life. In other worlds [sic], as a minimum, all people in all countries should have at least such a level of health that they are capable of working productively and of participating actively in the social life of the community in which they live [2]. Thus, the Assembly's decision was very instrumental in broadening perception of health, from the traditional idea of individual health to the more inclusive idea of public health. Consistent with this, and consistent with WHO's broad definition of health, the Assembly's decision indirectly underscored the importance of quality of life through equity and social justice in health. The decision implied in turn that an increased role of public health is needed to achieve the goal of health for all effectively.

The International Conference on Primary Health Care, Alma-Ata, 1978, reinforced and amplified the 1977 World Health Assembly decision. The Conference Declaration[3] reaffirmed that health is a fundamental human right, and stated that achievement of health requires cooperation among many social and economic sectors. Subsequently, in 1980, the WHO put forward a global strategy for health for all [3]. This strategy is based on countrywide health systems, and emphasizes the importance of cooperative action, in accord with the principles of the Alma-Ata Conference Declaration [4].

In achieving health for all, it is essential that public health cooperate closely and effectively with other disciplines such as environmental science, the medical sciences, and social science. Essential functions of public health include promoting human health and development, preventing and controlling the occurrence of diseases, prolonging life of the sick, and rehabilitating the disabled. To be effective, these and related functions must be organized and implemented largely through community efforts. The aim of health development today has moved beyond prolonging life, and now includes enabling people to be socially and economically productive throughout their life span. Therefore, as mentioned previously, it is necessary to work much more for quality of life through multisectoral and multidisciplinary involvement.

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Of course, mortality prevention and morbidity control remain important components of public health, but these must not be regarded as its exclusive components.

A major problem that we are facing in public health today is a definite insufficiency in the relevance and effectiveness of health policies and health systems. Similarly, current levels of investment are not sufficient for effective public health development. Another important issue is that governments by themselves cannot ensure the fair distribution of health resources at the national and international levels. Education and empowerment of people in the community also continue to be inadequately effective. Such education and empowerment will be essential to achieve health for all. Community health development must place emphasis on progressive strategies in addition to defensive approaches. Health promotion and disease prevention should be urgently accorded high priority in national health agendas. Inadequate public health interventions could result in increased long-term burden in several areas in the future. These include increased health care costs, which are skyrocketing even at present. Future primary health care approaches must move from merely providing health services to more comprehensive development strategies, whose implementation will effectively lead to enhancement of the population's productivity both socially and economically. In other words, educating and empowering people at the community level are essential components in reaching the goal of healthy populations.

In summary, effective public health requires strong multidisciplinary effort at the individual, national, governmental, and international levels. It requires shared responsibility and leadership, as well as shared accountability and credit, among all stakeholders and partners. We must understand clearly that public health work is challenging. It requires unwavering determination, dedication, and commitment by all participants. It also requires us to believe strongly in our own ability to achieve health for all. The essential work of public health will be successful if these requirements are met. Finally, I would like to emphasize that public health is a noble career.

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