Global Themes in International Public Health

Public health is defined as ‘the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life, and promoting health through the organised efforts of society’. The delivery of public health can be considered in three domains: health protection, health promotion or improvement, and health and social care. Health protection is concerned with the protection of health through immunisation, screening, and the management of threats to health from communicable diseases and the environment. Increasing international travel for work and leisure is accompanied by a range of communicable diseases which travel the globe faster than ever before in history. Promotion of health is conducted through individual and community approaches to encouraging individuals, families, and communities to adopt healthy lifestyles and by creating an environment which makes healthy choices easier. The health and social care domain of public health is concerned about provision of accessible and cost effective interventions that improve morbidity and mortality. The organisation and implementation of each of these aspects of the public health function varies between countries. This paper highlights four major, global themes for public health in the 21st century: inequalities, changing patterns of disease, evidence of cost-effectiveness, and the importance of partnerships.

1. Inequalities in health are a global issue, as the gap in health status across the social spectrum continues to widen in almost every country. Differences in access to health care are only part of the explanation although advances in health care technology and increasing costs are a factor. The reasons for these inequalities are complex and include increasing differences in income, housing standards, nutrition, education, as well as environmental protection such as sanitation and safe water. Public health takes a whole population perspective and needs to identify these inequalities and work to reduce differences across socio-economic groups as well as by gender, ethnicity and age.

2. Epidemiology, the study of the distribution and determinants of diseases in a population, is a key part of public health. Public health needs to recognise the changing patterns of disease in the community and to respond to these changes. These changes include a shift from infectious diseases to chronic and degenerative illnesses in developing countries. Many countries are in a state of economic transition experiencing both, for example part of the population in a developing country may experience malnutrition, whilst another part experiences obesity. Population change, ageing, growth, and migration both internally (rural to urban) and externally (regionally and globally) affect patterns of disease. The spread of diseases in a population is influenced by climate, behavioural and environmental factors, such as the increase in skin cancer and the increase in lung cancer rates 20 to 30 years after people take up smoking. Civil unrest, terrorism and conflict also affect the population’s health.

3. Resources for public health are scarce, particularly trained staff. It is essential that choices on the use of these resources are made based on evidence. An important function of public
health is to generate, appraise, and synthesise evidence of effectiveness of interventions. The Cochrane Collaboration and other mechanisms producing high quality synthesis of evidence are vital in public health. Cost-effectiveness information is equally crucial as resources are limited. The opportunity costs of any public health expenditure needs to be considered where greater benefits could be achieved by using the same resources in another programme. Public health researchers point out that 90% of all ill health occurs in developing countries, whilst about 90% of all health research is conducted in developed countries. Compare the research spending on new drugs to treat obesity with that spent on developing new drugs to treat leprosy.

4. The health of the population is the responsibility of society as whole, not just public health staff. Public health staff need to work in partnership with education, social services, environmental services, industry and the voluntary non-governmental sectors as well as with departments and ministries of health. Prevention of disease and promotion of health is based on collective responsibilities. Public health needs to be multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary to help (a) understand the causes of ill health and the factors leading to these causes; (b) design complex community-based interventions; and (c) evaluate the effectiveness of such interventions. It is widely recognised that community participation, where individuals and communities work with responsible organisations, is essential to achieve the objectives of public health.

The major global themes in public health are universal: inequalities, changing patterns of disease, use of robust economic and effectiveness evidence, and partnership working are at the core of public health.

Department of Public Health
University of Aberdeen
Scotland, UK

W. C. S. SMITH
A. S. POOBALAN
E. VAN TEIJLINGEN

References