EUPHA - twenty years of association in the field of Public Health

Interview Guide with:  
Prof. Walter RICCIARDI  
President of the European Public Health Association (EUPHA) 2010-2014

Biography  
Walter Ricciardi is Professor of Hygiene and Public Health at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Rome where he is also Director of the Department of Public Health, Deputy Head (2010 - 2014) of the Faculty of Medicine "A. Gemelli" and Director of the local School of Public Health.

In 1999 he has been appointed Member with distinction of the Faculty of Public Health Medicine of the Royal Colleges of Physicians of the United Kingdom and in 2002 Fellow of the same organisation. He has served as President of the European Public Health Association (EUPHA) in the years 2003-2004 and as Coordinator of the Committee of Past Presidents of EUPHA from 2005 to 2009. He has been Chairman of the Italian Faculty of Public Health in the years 2004-2006 Secretary General of the Italian Society of Hygiene Preventive Medicine and Public Health in the years 2007-2008.  

In 2009 he has been appointed Member of the Board of the National Board of Medical Examiners of the United States of America and in 2010 he has been elected President of the European Public Health Association (EUPHA) 2010-2014.  

He is an external reviewer of research programmes for the French, Dutch and Norwegian National Research Council and since 2002 is an External Examiner for the PhD programmes of the University of London. He manages several undergraduate and postgraduate teaching activities. Among them a Master of Science programme and International Courses in Epidemiology. In Italy he has been sitting in the Higher Health Council of the Ministry of Health in the years 2003-2006 and is currently member of the National Committee for the Evaluation of the Italian National Health Service and of the National Committee for Vaccinations.  

In 2010 the Minister of Health of Italy has appointed him in the Higher Health Council where he chairs the Public Health Section.  


His current research work is mainly in the field of Applied Epidemiology, Health Services Research, Health Services Management and Public Health Genomics.  

He has published more than 300 papers mostly in peer reviewed scientific journals and 6 teaching books.

Academic positions:  
Walter Ricciardi is Full Professor of Hygiene and Public Health at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Rome where he is also Director of the Department of Public Health, Deputy Head (2010 - 2014) of the Faculty of Medicine "A. Gemelli" and Director of the local School of Public Health.

Research interests:  
Applied Epidemiology, Health Services Research, Health Services Management and Public Health Genomics.
process, we have chosen to give priority to a co-operative approach to work in partnership with governmental and non-governmental organizations and institutions working in our field and sharing our objective.

This means that collecting all of Europe’s under the common roof of an umbrella组织, as is usually the case in scientific organizations, for us is just the beginning. We succeeded in going beyond that, and the very next future is even more promising.

R: The recognition of your status was reiterated when you were re-elected president of the European Public Health Association for 2010-2014. You are now almost halfway of this new mandate when many of your proposals are on the way or have even been finalized, and most probably the EUPHA strategy is not entirely applied yet.

- What is the global responsibility of EUPHA at European level, in the PH field?
- How is built and run this type of association? (please refer to membership, rules for an efficient and functional activity, objectives and activities etc.)
- What are the perspectives for future organizational development of EUPHA?

WR: EUPHA represents the largest network for European Public Health and has been expanding steadily since its establishment in 1992. Our annual conferences, which are each devoted to a specific Public Health topic and, from 2008, are organized jointly with ASPHER (Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region), are the largest European event in the field of Public Health and are recognized as a crucial appointment for both researchers and, increasingly over the last years, professionals and policy-makers. Being a EUPHA member means having access to the most up-to-date information on what is happening in public health research, policy and practice at the European level, through a series of tools that include access to the European Journal of Public Health (edited by the Oxford University Press), the full version of our website, the monthly newsletter, the EUPHA Reports and the recently activated EUPHApedia, a user-friendly online database of documents encompassing the whole scope of public health, continuously updated and open to contributions by the members themselves.

One of the most important asset of EUPHA is represented by the constitution and the activity of the Sections. A EUPHA Section is a group of professionals from different institutions and countries working in the same sector of Public Health. Belonging to a section means being facilitated in participating in the activity of Europe’s Public Health community, in particular by having access to information made available by other members and by being facilitated in setting up and taking part in large-scale international projects, both in research and practice.

Furthermore in cooperation with the Open Society Institute of the SOROS foundation, EUPHA is committed to continuous support for CEE public health professionals and professional networks.

R: As we are already used to, the annual EUPHA conference is dedicated to a specific theme and for the 2011 EPH Conference topics like “welfare development” and “health” are in the centre of all events taking place on 9-12 November 2011 in Copenhagen. In the past EUPHA conferences, we had the opportunity to participate in a lot of workshops planned around various topics linked with the main conference theme.

- What are your expectations related with the results of the 2011 EPH conference?
- What do you consider would be the main benefits for the institutions and professionals by participating regularly to annual EPH conferences?

WR: The European Public Health Conference remains a key occasion Europe’s public health experts to meet, exchange experiences and views and set up joint initiatives.

The health status of Europeans has been improving, but we still have risk factors that have never been addressed satisfactorily in our history, such as air pollution and gender inequalities; threats that we thought we had defeated but that are rearing their head again, like sexually transmitted diseases; and of course new threats we have to be prepared to deal with for the first time, like the far-reaching implications of climate change and the effect of economic crises like that we have been experiencing on socio-economic inequalities. It is therefore essential that public health moves forward, and such a progress can only be made by means of a collaborative effort – the challenges we have to face are transnational, and local or regional initiatives or efforts will never be as effective as international ones in dealing with them.

EUPHA conferences are trying to contribute to improving health and reduce health inequalities for all Europeans both indirectly and directly. The researchers belonging to our network produce an impressive amount of high-quality scientific evidence, which is funnelled into communication channels such as our Annual Conference, the European Journal of Public Health and now EUPHApedia. We operate with a constant effort in advocacy so that the strategies we support are actually applied by local institutions, national governments and international organizations with competences related to healthcare all over Europe. Health inequalities, in particular, represent an across-the-board challenge for healthcare and health that concerns all fields of public health, and we take it as a priority to lay bare the extent to which our society suffers from them and how better health policies (and even policies not strictly or explicitly related to health) could do wonders in reducing them and improving fairness in our everyday life.
R: One of the current national PH concerns remains: "how to develop efficient health policies?"

In the same time, the main concern and responsibility at European level is to create a functional framework and collaborations for sharing experience and practice in order to support governments in producing and implementing more effective and efficient health policies.

WR: In this context, do you think that the 2011 EPH conference could be considered as a good option to meet expectations required from such framework? Please describe.

We make it a point to create evidence, help translate it into practice, and make this translation as effective as possible in terms of the final goal of fostering the health status. There is no point in only supporting one of these stages. Adding value can therefore mean: ensuring the highest scientific rigor and severity when producing new evidence; bringing researchers and the results of their investigations into contact with practitioners and policy-makers, so that they can usefully orient each others’ priorities and activities; and finally using that information, those strategies or those tools where appropriate, when appropriate and in the appropriate manner.

We consider capacity building as a necessary condition for moving from theory to practice in using public health tools and instruments to actually make a difference in terms of health status and well-being. EUPHA supports a wide series of activities that are oriented to enhance the skills and knowledge, but also the commitment and the confidence of public health practitioners and professionals. Among these are the sponsorship of training activities, the support of the exchange of information oriented to diffuse best practices and the active and direct cooperation with leading international organisations such as the European Union and the WHO. This involves the levels of human resources, of organisational structures and processes, and of the legal and institutional framework they operate in – both nationally and internationally.

R: The spectrum of PH organizations established at the European level is enlarging rapidly: EUPHA was founded 20 year ago and is still remains the main organization in this field. The tendency in approaching current health issues is now to gather PH for sharing the same purpose within a consortium; by this, the added value of consortium and each partner is intended to be incremented as a new collaboration is developed.

- If you should compare EUPHA during last ten years, what lessons could be learned from this experience?
- What collaborations/consortium was established by EUPHA with important organizations?
- Would you mention please, what plus value is expected from this collaborations?
- What do you consider to be the essential elements for bringing together two European key PH organizations? Please refer also at collaboration with ASPHER.

WR: EUPHA works in close contact with the leading international organizations whose activities have relevance to public health. Authoritative representatives of WHO, EU, OECD are commonly guests of our Annual Conference. Several of our institutional members are charged by local, regional and national authorities to design interventions in specific fields of health-related policies which fall within their remit. But very often we even go beyond that.

Research is the first of the four pillars of EUPHA activities (the other three being Policy, Practice and Education and Training). EUPHA was established by scientists, and this original calling is still clearly visible in our firm belief that solid and credible evidence is a condition for all health-related interventions to be effective. Every Public Health Conference, without ever deviating from the goal of providing a faithful and updated representation of the state of the art of all European research in public health, is also devoted to a specific topic of current interest to ensure that present priorities are addressed and steer the general direction of research – the 2010 Amsterdam conference was devoted to Integrated Public Health, the immediate past conference in Copenhagen has been focused on Health, Public Health and Welfare Development. We facilitate research by providing – and we even support young researchers starting their career in public health, by facilitating access to our conference and publications for junior researchers and by new initiatives such as EUPHAnxt, a network of young public health researchers, which has been presented at the 2011 Copenhagen conference. This is also a way of preventing research from being “wasted” – what we must do is use our discoveries for practical applications. This is usually difficult, because researchers and policymakers appear to talk different languages: researchers do not know what policymakers need and in what form to present their findings in a way useful for practice, while policymakers do not know where to find, how to interpret and how to use evidence from research. This is what we do to solve the problem: we let our researchers work with practitioners and policymakers – EUPHA represents the ideal meeting point for them: in our Conference, on the pages of the Journal, within the context of the Sections, they can finally relate to each other. EUPHA participates in international projects aimed at monitoring and improving public health research and capacity development in Europe. The most recent examples were the STEPS (Strengthening Engagement in Public health research) project, completed in 2010, and the PHIRE project (Public Health Innovation and Research in Europe), the results of which will be available by mid-2012.

As EUPHA, we think that it is a priority today that both the general and the technical public realize that all policies, all laws, all behaviours by families and citizens have an impact on health. Health is not just a matter to be solved inside general practices and hospitals. Realizing that, becoming aware that we can greatly improve the general well-being by looking at the health consequences of all our personal and collective decisions, is a step in the good direction for the future of all Europeans. We will work to raise this awareness, and we are confident we can make it.

Interview conducted by Marius CIUTAN, MD, specialist in Public Health and Management