EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN PUBLIC HEALTH AT EUROPEAN STANDARDS

Interview with: Helmut BRAND, President-Elect of the Association of School of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER)

Biography
Helmut Brand is Professor of European Public Health and Head of the Department of International Health at Maastricht University. He studied Medicine in Düsseldorf and Zürich and earned a Master in Community Medicine from London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and London School of Economics. Prof. Brand is a specialist in Public Health Medicine in Germany and the UK.

He worked in several Health Authorities and Ministries of Health. For 13 years he was director of the Public Health Institute of North Rhine Westphalia in Germany. Since then European Integration in Health is the main topic of his work. The recent research focus is on the European dimension of cross border health, comparative studies, policy advise and surveillance systems.

Reporter: Mr. Brand, Public Health has marked a renewal in the last decade and training was positioned on the top of the sectors contributing to its rapid development and progress at the European level.

In the context of a large diversity of Public Health (PH) education, ASPHER is the European organization that brings together PH educational institutions creating a European working framework in this field.

Helmut Brand: The Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER) is the key independent European organization dedicated to strengthening the role of public health by improving education and training of public health professionals for both practice and research. Founded in 1966, ASPHER has over 80 institutional members located throughout the Member States of the European Union (EU), the Council of Europe (CE) and European Region of the World Health Organization (WHO). Over the last 45 years Public Health changed a lot and so has ASPHER. In the beginning it was one of the few organization dedicated to Public Health. The Maastricht treaty in 1992 gave European Commission a mandate for Public Health. Since then you find more and more non-governmental organizations that deal with Public Health on European level. The job of ASPHER is now to work on Public Health education and training. As there are more courses offered at Universities regarding Public Health you need an institution that can help them and is able to set standards. Furthermore it is important to organize collaborative research not only on Public Health issues but on Public Health training. This is very much needed in the countries outside the European Union especially in those of the former Soviet Union. In the next years ASPHER will try to have more members from those countries so that they feel represented in the Public Health community.

R: Given your European PH background, you encountered many opportunities to be in contact with PH professionals and PH educational systems in almost all European countries and probably already have an overview on diversity existing in this field.

HB: Public Health in Europe is diverse. In a way we all agree on some core function a health system has to deliver. But how to organize it and what kind of competencies the people have who work on it, this varies a lot. And this is not only because of the different organizational structure between the countries. History and culture play an important role too.

By joining ASPHER Schools of Public Health are part of a kind of family. We are all a little bit different but share the vision for the need of Public Health. Mentoring young schools of Public Health, offering access to educational material, defining the competencies the Public Health force has to have, all this are important on which you cannot work alone. Additionally you have to be represented: to keep in contact with the European Commission and WHO-Europe and lobby for the interest of Schools of Public Health keeps Public Health on the agenda of those institutions.

R: As the new elected-president of this key independent organization, you already have a vision on the impact of training for improving the role of PH sector and most probably your vision is build on general values and principles promoted by ASPHER.

HB: A presidency has to react to the actual needs of Schools of Public Health. Here I see for example the problem to secure the future of schools of Public Health in times of economic crises. As most of them are financed by state money we have to inform governments about the importance of those institutions. Do not sacrifice long-term benefit for short-term savings!

On the other hand we often see that graduates do not find suitable jobs after they attained a degree. So we have to help the Health Systems in the European Region to integrate an educated Public Health workforce. Otherwise people will leave the country and are lost for their health system.
ASPHER will continue to cooperate with international organizations like EU and WHO in capacity building of the Public Health workforce. At the European Health Forum Gastein this year e.g. ASPHER is involved in a forum of WHO-Euro and one from the European Center for Disease Control (ECDC).

As most Public Health experts are already working and are not in education we have to expand the educational basis of Schools of Public Health to “Life Long Learning”. Only by this we can secure that modern methods in Public Health reach the Public health practitioners.

R: The core activities of ASPHER are centered on the working groups covering a large spectrum of PH practice and research: PH competencies, global health, research capacities, good-practice in PH education, PH policy and practice, ethics and values in School of PH, advocacy and communication, and accreditation.

HB: The working groups reflect and represent the problems Public Health faces in the European region. We have to discuss what competencies Public Health specialists should have facing changing problems in and between the countries. There are now some issues coming up like global warming, pandemics or the consequences of globalization that affect all countries - are they rich or poor and they do not respect borders. We have to find common answers to this. The action we take has to be based on the values we share - so we have to discuss them, find a common understanding and advocate for them. The large spectrum of Public Health topics makes it sometimes difficult to focus, but as the world gets more diversified, we have to learn how to deal with this.

R: One of the most expected events and results is represented by foundation of the Agency for Public Health Accreditation in Europe (APHEA). The new agency could represent the guarantee of recognizing and promoting the high quality standards for PH graduate education at European level and thus, the quality of PH workforce in Europe would be improved.

HB: On 1st of April this year the Agency for Public Health Accreditation in Europe (APHEA) was set up. It started by a consortium of prominent European organizations in public health, is the first European agency of its kind to accredit the Master of Public Health degree and its equivalent seeking to promote high quality standards for public health education at the graduate level. The consortium includes not only ASPHER but the European Public Health Association (EUPHA), the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA), and the European Health Management Association (EHMA).

The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the Kazakhstan School of Public Health have indicated interest in being in the first group to undergo accreditation of their programmes. The accreditation process will entail eligibility, self-evaluation, and external evaluation phases and take approximately one year to complete.

This agency will contribute to the development and harmonization of Public Health education throughout Europe, provide an added value with regard to national quality assurance and accreditation, and ultimately improve the quality of the public health workforce in Europe and its competitiveness globally.

Programmes leading to a Master of Public Health are at present evaluated or accredited by national education authorities in most countries within the European Region. However, there is presently no specific accreditation system for education in public health at the European level. A programme accredited by national authorities alone, no matter how rigorously the accreditation process is carried out, still lacks the international recognition that may come from a European accreditation system. European accreditation will therefore serve as an additional proof of quality for students, academics, partner institutions, and funding bodies.

Establishment of the European system will help many institutions to improve their quality and raise their profile. A degree from a European accredited programme potentially provides the graduate with better opportunities for employment internationally and allows for transferability of qualifications. It also allows for greater benefit to foreign students who may wish to study in a particular country and will now be able to bring home an internationally recognized degree.

R: Based on the model adopted by almost all European organizations, ASPHER developed a lot of collaborations, especially with corresponding organizations. The most recent collaboration is the one with the European Public Health Association-EUPHA.

HB: Some years ago EUPHA and ASPHER decided to join their former independent Public Health Conference in one: The European Public Health Conference (EPH-Conference) which in 2011 will be in Copenhagen. By this we join forces and make this conference the most important European Public Health event of the year. It is like one-stop-shop: if you want an update on public health research, practice or education, if you would like to meet the expert in your fields, by joining one conference you can have it all. Additionally we create much more media attention then having two smaller events. And we save time and money of the Public Health specialists as most of us are so busy that we can hardly attend two conferences.

But the cooperation with EUPHA is not restricted to this. We work together on common projects and share the workload of advocating for Public Health. Further ongoing cooperation we have e.g. with the European Health Management Association (EHMA) and the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA).