GLOBAL HEALTH EQUITY – ACTION TO PROMOTE AND ACHIEVE HEALTH EQUITY FOR ALL CITIZENS

INTERVIEW with JAMES CHAUVIN
President of The World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA)

Mr. Chauvin joined the Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) in 1992. As Director of Policy, Mr. Chauvin oversees the formulation of the Association’s policy positions and implementation of its advocacy strategy on public health issues, both in Canada and internationally. From 2005 to 2008, he was Director of CPHA’s Global Health Programs. Prior to this, he developed and managed several CPHA international public health initiatives. He was deployed overseas in 2003 for 18 months as the CPHA Regional Coordinator for South East Europe, managing the implementation of two CIDA-funded projects, one to rebuild and enhance the public health system and the other a regional HIV prevention project in the countries of former Yugoslavia, including Kosovo. Mr. Chauvin also served for 6 months in 2006/7 as the Interim Executive Director of the Southern African AIDS Trust (SAT), a regional African NGO based in Johannesburg implementing HIV prevention and AIDS care and support initiatives in several southern African countries.

He serves as CPHA’s representative on the World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA). In May 2010, Mr. Chauvin was elected Vice-President & President-Elect of the WFPHA (2010-2012). On April 25, 2012 he assumed the WFPHA Presidency for a two-year term.

Prior to joining CPHA, Mr. Chauvin was employed in the former Health Sciences Division at the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). He also worked with CARE and other international organizations overseas in several countries. He sits on several national and international health advisory committees. He has authored and contributed to the preparation of many public health-related publications and articles and is an Associate Editor of the European Journal of Public Health.

Mr. Chauvin holds an MA in Geography (with a specialization in medical geography) from Queen’s University (Kingston, ON, Canada) and a MSc. in health services planning and administration from the University of British Columbia (Vancouver, BC, Canada).

J C: The WFPHA is an international, independent, non-governmental organization composed of multidisciplinary national public health associations from around the world. It is the only worldwide professional society representing and serving the broad field of public health. WFPHA’s mission is to promote and protect global public health. It does this by supporting the establishment and organizational development of public health associations and societies of public health, through facilitating and supporting the exchange of information, knowledge and the transfer of skills and resources, and through promoting and undertaking advocacy for public policies, programs and practices that will result in a healthy and productive world.

WFPHA, through its member associations, monitors what they feel are the most important and emerging public health issues that affect not only their country, but which also have consequences for global public health. The WFPHA has at present five working groups (environmental health, global health equity, professional education and training, tobacco control, and oral health) which provide guidance to the Federation on these issues. WFPHA also collaborates and cooperates with other international societies and organizations, and has lent its support through endorsements and other mechanisms on global public health issues. The WFPHA also maintains its status as an organization with special relations with the WHO – we value very highly this collaboration with the world’s pre-eminent body on global health. Through this relationship, we can advise WHO about the concerns of our member associations, and we can also inform our member associations about issues of concern to WHO and action being taken on them.

At present, WFPHA is exploring how we can assist member associations improve their advocacy capacity – how to build a strong, vibrant and evidence-informed politically non-partisan voice in support of and in defense of sound healthy public policy and practice that protects and pro-
The actual concerns in the field of public health are different from the previous period, given that we must face with new challenges. In this context, the global public health approach seems to be the most appropriate way in finding solutions that can be implemented in practice, and the concept is widely explored by public health professional’s community.

- In your opinion, what are the current public health issues at international level?
- How these issues should be approached, taking into account the perspective of public health professionals?,
- What do you consider would be the most effective contribution of PH federations in approaching these new challenges?

J C: There are many important public health issues at the present time. It is difficult to select one or two as being ‘more important’ than others. That being said, I would suggest two very important public health-related issues at the moment. The first is the low level of investment by governments, at all levels, in essential public health functions and in the factors outside of the formal health care delivery system that affect health. This includes the adoption and application by governments of a ‘health lens’ to ascertain the potential impact on health of government regulations, policy, legislation and programs. Governments become so focused on the delivery of acute care services in response to illness episodes that they seem to overlook the high return on investment of basic public health functions (for example, immunization, surveillance, injury prevention, primary prevention services for healthy mothers and babies/children, mental health promotion). This is especially true in times of economic austerity and cutbacks in publicly funded programs.

A second issue that I believe is of critical importance at the moment is to promote and adopt a population health approach, investing in strategies that put into place the mechanisms and means for people to make changes in their lives. We need to move beyond ‘lifestyle/behaviour change’ strategies that focus on the individual. While such strategies are an important component of a comprehensive public health approach, they are insufficient in and of themselves. It is all well and good to exhort people to stop smoking, eat healthier foods, exercise, etc – these are good things to do – but if people lead stressful lives as a result of poor working conditions or low income, do not have access to healthy foods, are bombarded by unrestricted advertising of tobacco products and junk food, and live in built environments that are unhealthy and unsupportive of healthy living, then how can we expect people to change their behaviour or practices?

What is the most important contribution by public health associations and the WFPHA in approaching these new challenges? First, evidence-informed and well-communicated advocacy. Second, providing politically non-partisan, robust advice, and a platform of options, to politicians and decision-makers in an non-threatening and professional way. Third, bringing to light effective and innovative public health approaches and practices which can make a difference in terms of health outcomes. And fourth, engaging with non-traditional sectors, stakeholders and potential partners.

The 13th World Congress on Public Health was a very successful event organized by WFPHA in Addis Ababa on April 2012, and this congress was completed by elaboration and approval of “The Addis Ababa Declaration on Global Health Equity: A Call to Action”.

- What do you consider to be the achievements of this recent congress? and
- What are the principles promoted in this declaration? Please mention also the main actions the WFPHA is calling for.

J C: In my opinion, one of the greatest achievements of the recent World Congress on Public Health was the fact that it brought together over 3,000 people from over 116 countries to share experiences, knowledge and new approaches. Face-to-face events such as the World Congress on Public Health are important learning opportunities for people working on the front-line of public health. It provides and opportunity to listen and learn about effective innovative approaches being used elsewhere in the world, and to reflect on how they might be adapted to other places and populations.

I also see the Addis Ababa Declaration as an “achievement” for the WFPHA – it defines a set of action areas to be undertaken and achieved by the Federation between now and the next World Congress (which will take place in Kolkata, India between February 11 – 15, 2015).

The principles enunciated in the Addis Ababa Declaration are (but are not restricted to): good governance, solidarity, equity and fairness, empowerment and participation, and social justice, as means to achieve the highest possible standards of health for all people everywhere in the world. Besides the 10 actions that WFPHA pledges to undertake, the Declaration also includes a call by WFPHA on other actors to take action to achieve the highest possible standards of health for all people everywhere in the world. For example, WFPHA calls on the World Health Organization to take up its leadership role on global public health and to revisit all the MDGs from a public health perspective to ‘close the gap’. The Federation also calls upon all governments and all parties to recognize and live up to their responsibility for global health equity. We also call on the various communities represented at this 13th World Congress on Public Health to engage with their governments and other stakeholders, including their national public health associations, to formulate and put into place the conditions that support healthy environments

Mr. President, your vast experience in the field of public health and previous positions with the CPHA and WFPHA give you the ability to think about the public health in visionary terms.

- What do you consider to be the essential elements for bringing together all international and relevant PH organizations for a common scope to make sustainable and feasible public health policy and strategies?
- What is the perspective for future organizational development of WFPHA? And
- How could be increased the role of WFPHA in making public health policies?

J C: I would say the essential elements for bringing together all international and relevant public health organizations for a common scope are: (1) openness and transparency of purpose; (2) a common goal; (3) a capacity to learn, critically reflect and if need be, change attitudes and positions on an issue and (4) commitment and willingness to be actively involved in implementing the means to achieve the goal. The WFPHA offers the means to convene and bring together public health communities from around the world on an equal basis, to listen and learn from each other, and then to define a common goal and the way forward, in a collegial and professional environment.

Over the next year, I see the WFPHA redefining how it does its advocacy. We need to become much more responsive to what our member organizations see as priority public health issues, and rethink how we advocate and communicate our organizational perspective and opinion. This means engaging more actively our member associations in discussions and action – which means that our member associations have to become more engaged and active within the Federation. Passive member associations = a passive Federation, which is not what we want. We need active and engaged member associations.

One of the main goals of WFPHA is “To advance public health practice, education/training, and research”. As well, one of the working groups constituted within WFPHA is dedicated to Public Health Education

- What is the purpose of WFPHA Public Health Education Work Group?
- Please tell us how WFPHA could contribute to the strengthening of and advance in public health education and research and how do you see the collaboration of WFPHA with the Schools of Public Health.