SCIENCE ADVICE FOR HEALTH IN EUROPE

Interview Guide with CARLOS SEGOVIA PEREZ
President of The European Science Advisory Network for Health (EuSANH)

Carlos Segovia is currently Head of the unit of Accreditation of Health Research Institutes at the national Institute of Health Carlos III (ISCIII), Spain. He has been Deputy Director for International Research Programmes from 2009 to 2013, being involved on health related European research initiatives, and was national representative at IARC, TDR, RIMAIS, and IVI. He has been coordinator of JPIs To Co-Work and EU-LAC Health and collaborates in CHRODIS. He has been structural trainee at the European Commission and National Focal Point for the EC Health programme. He is currently president of EuSANH (European Science Advisory Network for Health).

Carlos Segovia is primary care physician and master of public health from Harvard University. Before joining ISCIII, Carlos has been coordinator of a primary care centre for two years, head of primary care quality and research of a province for ten years, and expert for social and health care coordination at a Regional Department of Health for two years.

Reporter: Mr. Carlos Segovia Perez, the progress encountered in all domains led to an extensive scientific result which has not always been followed by informed and firm actions. In this time, the needs of society are increasing and more and more diverse, and in this context the need to have an effective decision-making process is more acute than never was.

- What are the ingredients necessary to link these needs and can thus help for better implementation of scientific results?
- What is the role of science advice and how would you define this concept?

CARLOS SEGOVIA PEREZ: Science advice is a process by which societal needs are spelled out in such a way that scientific knowledge can provide information about the consequences of different policy options. The process entails open and transparent communication channels between societal stakeholders, policy makers, science advisors and scientists. The basic principles are explained in the text “A Framework for Science Advice on Health: Principles and Guidelines” that can be downloaded from the EuSANH webpage.

Science advice is not to promote any particular societal value or goal, it rather takes these values chosen by others into account, so that the potential consequences of policies can be assessed against them. The only values in which science advice are based are transparency and accuracy or thoroughness.

R: Mr. President, you have been coordinating the European Science Advisory Network for Health since November 2012 and in this position you are in contact with different European Science Advice Bodies and also, with many institutions related with policy making process, at European and international level.

- Why cooperation in the field of Science advice for health is needed, at European level?

CSP: Scientific knowledge is almost by definition globally valid. At the same time it evolves and increases very rapidly. There may be two reasons why science advice is needed at European level. One is that a collaborative effort in science advice would be more efficient by sharing resources and involving the best scientists across Europe at a lower cost for any single country or policy maker. The second reason is that the value of science advice is not always recognized, and a European coordinated action would promote it. This would then contribute to better quality policy making at European and also national level.

- What are the mission and the main goals of EUSANH?

CSP: The mission of EuSANH is to promote independent scientific advice on health to national and European health authorities and support evidence-based health policy making.

- Who are the main beneficiaries of the EUSANH activities?

CSP: The main potential beneficiaries are ministries of health, departments of public health, health professionals and the European Commission. However, so far the beneficiaries have been the science advisory bodies that are members of EuSANH. We have described how science advice is organized in our countries, we have agreed on common principles of science advice, and we have applied them in a couple of health issues.

- What perspectives can you see for these networks?

CSP: It depends very much on the coordination of agendas of different ministries of health and countries. Demands for science advice cover very different topics in different countries, or the same topics but at different moments in time. In the other hand, the approach taken by the
European Commission is to promote collaboration on health technology assessment rather than science advice at full. The EC also has its own scientific expert groups, but this is not a collaborative initiative with Member States.

R: 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 professionals’ community.

- In your opinion, what are the current public health issues at international level?

CSP: The answer depends on the way you describe “public health issues”. In terms of health problems and if we refer to the European context, it is clear that chronic conditions and conditions related to aging are of increasing concern. But we can relate them to life styles, which could then be identified as a complementary perspective. At the same time, Europe cannot forget or neglect infectious diseases that can raise important health threats like those of antimicrobial resistance or infectious domestic or imported outbreaks.

In terms of health policy or health care, maintaining health investments and sound health care systems is of obvious current importance because of the economic crisis in Europe. While economic policies are discussed and supervised at European level, and have direct influence on our health systems, there is nothing to guarantee that health consequences of these policies are taken into their equations. Health equity is also increasingly a value and a concern across Europe, and some even deemed it to be a pillar for economic growth.

- How these issues should be approached?, and

CSP: In my opinion a collaborative effort at European level is needed to tackle chronicity and to have the best public health responses to public health threats. In addition, health should be part of the political agenda at highest level.

- What do you consider would be the most effective contribution of EUSANH in approaching these new challenges?

CSP: To showcase how collaboration in science advice improves the quality and efficiency of science advice itself and improves policy making.

R: As areas where progress is being made in terms of health scientific results are different, it is expected that the spectrum of fields in which you can act to be quite wide.

- How would you appreciate the science advice producing at European level, in term of diversity of topics approached? What do you consider to be the main factors for this diversity in science advice production, among Science Advice Bodies at European level?

CSP: Topics are highly diverse. Some Advisory Bodies seem to focus more on risk assessment of substances or chemicals, others respond mainly on demand frequently triggered by health crisis such as Ebola. Diversity stems from the different perspective that health authorities take on science advice. The demand for science advice seems to be inversely related to the level of policy decision. The more important or relevant the decision, the less demand for science advice. Please enumerate the domains, and where it is the case, provide an example of the cooperation where EUSANH, or members of EUSANH detain expertise for science advice providing.

EuSANH addressed the issue of cancer screening programmes. It also explored the problem of vaccine schedules across Europe.

What health issues for which collaboration on the transnational and European level would be especially relevant could be a target for your network? Considering the European priorities in health, improving health systems, infectious diseases, chronic diseases and aging would be relevant. If we look at Member States priorities for health research, aging, neurodegenerative diseases, antimicrobial resistance and diet are the priority areas where EuSANH could be of help.

R: Given your current position and also your experience in the health sector, it can be said that you encountered many opportunities to be in contact with health professionals and policy makers, but also with other stakeholders or professionals having an interest in developing the science advice for health at European level.

- What is your vision on science advice developing in Europe, and what would be the perspectives for further development of this domain?

CSP: Science advice has different maturity, scope and relevance in different European countries. It is only beginning to be seen as important at European level. However, European policies are more and more required to respond to societal needs, and to foresee their impact. Science advice will be much more important in the future.

- Would you like to add anything else, maybe an answer to a question unaddressed in this interview?

CSP: I would like to thank the Journal for giving me the opportunity of explaining and talking about EuSANH.

Thank you for your kindness to answer to questions.

Interview conducted by Marius Ciutan, MD