EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN PUBLIC HEALTH – new perspectives

Interview with Prof. Vesna BJEGOVIC-MIKANOVIC
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Vesna BJEGOVIC-MIKANOVIC studied medicine in Belgrade and gained MD, MSc and PhD degrees. She is a full professor for public health management, Vice-Dean at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Belgrade, and Head of the Chair of Social Medicine. For the last years her international research covered health systems research and strategic development in South Eastern Europe, hospital management and health economics, and evaluation of continuing and blended learning. She is Associate Editor of the Journal of Public Health (Springer). Several times she participated as consultant/expert, researcher, and coordinator of national and international public health projects of UNICEF and the World Bank in Central Asia, and of the European Union in South Eastern Europe. A Community Health Programme – “Development of local public health strategies”, which she led during four years, was awarded by SMDC CDC (Atlanta) for the methods in applied management learning in 2006. She has been founding Head of the Centre School of Public Health and Management at Belgrade University from 2005 to 2013 and continues as a member of the Centre’s Programme Council. From 2009 to 2014 she has served as the President of the Management Board of the National Institute of Public Health of Serbia “Dr Milan Jovanovic Batut.

Professor Bjegovic-Mikanovic is a member of the Executive Board of ASPHER since 2007 and president for the period 2014-2015. She is dedicated to networking, innovation, and good practice in public health education and research.

Reporter: Mrs. Vesna Bjegovic-Mikanovic, Public Health professional is a key person in the general attempt to prevent disease, promote health, and prolong life among the population as a whole. Its role is to monitor and diagnose the health concerns of entire communities and promote healthy practices and behaviours to ensure that populations stay healthy. In this regard, it is obvious that PH professional must be equipped/endoed and must have complex and diverse knowledge and skills so that to be able to identify health problems and priorities, to formulate public health policies, and to assure equitable population access to appropriate and cost-effective care, including health promotion and disease prevention services.

- In your opinion, what do you consider to be the best/appropriate way to achieve these requirements for PH specialists?

- What is the role of PH National School and how it is related with other health institution?

Vesna BJEGOVIC-MIKANOVIC Today public health, and therefore public health professionals are facing a number of profound and dynamic changes. These are related to goals like increasing healthy life years and reducing health inequalities in a time of financial crisis. To meet these challenges, a participatory approach is essential as well as addressing multiple causes at the socio-economic, environmental, and individual level, and through involvement of different actors. Public health professionals have to face this re-orientation of their professional horizon by capacity building through innovation and good-practice in public health education. They have to become leaders for the public health in the 21st century and have therefore to understand that “working differently means leading and learning differently”.

Clinical medicine is important, but without a population perspective health cannot be effectively secured. Although this notion is also embraced in the concept of primary health care referring to the potential role of practitioners to treat their patients, to organise self help groups, and to approach the community, most practitioners are more than overload with their first and main task to treat their patients, little time usually remains for the two additional tasks.

The notion of the population’s public health includes knowledge and capacity to perform epidemiological analysis of disease distribution and trends including also cost-benefit analyses of clinical services and authorised treatment schemes. Furthermore public health includes health system management together with the health policy component; it includes environmental health taking care of clean water, soil, and air; and last not least we need well organised health promotion campaigns with whole population coverage. All this cannot be done by clinical physicians but requires a interdisciplinary and multiprofessional approach.

Public health specialists therefore need to be well trained, usually at the post-graduate level of a Master of Public Health. In order to support the targeting of competency profiles and career patterns, it is necessary to support the development of and interaction with coherent systems of comprehensive public health service delivery with well-defined and well-described professional public health job structures and functions, competency
demands, decision levels and paths, and career structures. As a profession public health professionals should have their own chamber with the authority to certify and license them, and to offer obligatory training for Continuing Professional Development. This can be done best by a School of Public Health where all qualification for teaching the various subjects of public health is concentrated.

However, because of the interdisciplinary character of Public Health - as cited by you in your question – The School cooperates with many other faculties and disciplines to assure the best possible training quality for students and graduates. Of special importance are Sociology, Economics, Psychology, Mathematics, and Biology.

In general, education and training typically aim to provide students and trainees with the competences necessary to fill specified job roles in well-defined systems. In public health, neither job roles nor systems are clearly defined and lack unified concepts across European countries. Besides the comprehensive public health education and training programmes provided by schools of public health, there are numerous programmes covering limited aspects and competences and thus leading to a scattered picture as to what a public health expert is. Based on the comprehensive education and training programmes provided by schools, there exists a public health profession as defined by its competency profile and to some extent its organization, but an authorization/licensing scheme is needed as well as endorsement and visibility in international and national statistics.

R: 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.

- What is the mission and scope of ASPHER?
- What are the areas of interests for APHER?

VBM: The Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER) is the key independent European organisation 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 110 institutional members located throughout the Member States of the European Region of WHO and with associate members around the world. It is represented in 42 European countries, with more than 5000 academics and experts employed in its member institutions. It also has strong links with similar associations in other regions of the world, and with other European and international organisations active in the field of Public Health. Since the early nineties Europe is growing together again and ASPHER contributes to that under its mandate. Europe is also part of a rapidly integrating world and shares responsibility beyond continental borders.

ASPHER has created a journal the Public Health Reviews with predominantly thematic issues, the next forthcoming on Ethics. However, the Journal is open also for individual case reports from ASPHER members. So you are well invited to submit a case study of your National School of Public Health. Furthermore ASPHER built and is continuing to augment the ASPHER Resource Centre where you can find a lot of relevant material. Finally ASPHER initiated and continues to contribute to APHEA, the Agency for Public Health Education Accreditation with several levels of qualification for programmes and institutions in Public Health.

ASPHER considers the development of WHO Europe’s Health 2020 strategy a most important step towards improvement of European populations’ health and of European health systems and systems for public health services. Naturally, ASPHER also has got policies and strategic components of its own, not fully covered by the Health 2020 Strategy and the European Action Plan (EAP). Both WHO and ASPHER consider the shaping of a public health profession a central priority, and both organizations seek to develop policies and organizational structures and procedures to promote public health.

Focusing especially on Essential Public Health Operation 7 (EPHO 7), the EPHO 7 working group is being established to support the development of each of the EPHOs outlined in the EAP:

1. Surveillance of population health and well-being
2. Monitoring and response to health hazards and emergencies
3. Health protection including environmental, occupational, food safety and others
4. Health promotion including action to address social determinants and health inequity
5. Disease prevention, including early detection of illness
6. Assuring governance for health and well-being
7. Assuring a sufficient and competent public health workforce
8. Assuring sustainable organizational structures and financing
9. Advocacy, communication and social mobilization for health
10. Advancing public health research to inform policy and practice

The main purpose of the working group is to take forward with the WHO European Regional Office the implementation of the proposals within the EAP for the strengthening of public health services and capacities, and particularly on public health workforce (Avenues for action 7 and EPHO 7), focusing on the following principles:

- Mapping, analysing and scaling up developmental activities across the Region;
- Addressing regional inequalities, including contrasts between NIS and other member states;
- Promoting effective public health leadership;
- Looking for innovative approaches.
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.

- To what extent you consider diversity could be beneficial for such kind of association?
- What are the benefits for ASPHER members and consequently for European public health field deriving from this association?

VBM: Diversity is a European heritage and Europe will remain diverse. I consider this diversity as a huge advantage as it can create innovative solutions and transfer examples of best practice to other countries – by the way a basic principle of the European Union. That is often easier for small countries that can certainly leap-frog to the front in certain areas. Not everything ingenious needs money. Of course there are also risks of diversity namely fragmentation and aggression between different models of society and culture. Globally and also within the European Region with its 53 countries public health professionals are confronted with an extremely heterogeneous landscape, in general and as well in the field of their education and training, which is characterized by very different models and their variations. Nevertheless, the mainstream for European public health education and training develops along the Bologna Process. That is why ASPHER started many years ago a programme of harmonisation – not equalisation! – between teaching programmes at the master’s level. The unexpected success can be seen in the results from our European Public Health Survey published in the International Journal of Public Health 2013. From the same survey we analysed also the expectations of employers of public health professionals in over 30 European countries. It is good to study these analyses carefully in order to be prepared for the future and to continue successful stories throughout the next years.

ASPHER overall mission is to promote education, research and service in public health in order to foster a creative and dynamic academic and practical training infrastructure for public health workforce development. ASPHER members are collectively committed to public health capacity building. Whilst respecting the European diversity of national and regional contexts in which each school of public health operates, ASPHER promotes structured processes of sharing evidence-based public health, models of innovation and good practice, and mobilising schools of public health to be proactive in shaping the public health core competences. ASPHER's strategic vision includes the promotion of the highest standards of education and training for practice increasingly involving cross-sectoral intervention and global as much as Europe wide and national issues. A key role to promote and incorporate European values into the wider public health movement is also assumed by ASPHER.

ASPHER is also a proactive platform for information exchange, knowledge sharing and capacity building. ASPHER runs several working groups and organises numerous forums that work towards improving public health education and training in Europe. ASPHER Working Groups are: Public Health Core Competences, Innovation and Good Practice in Public Health Education with the Section of Global Public Health Education, Doctoral Programmes and Research capacities, Undergraduate Programmes in Public Health, and Ethics and Values in Public Health. The Association maintains close links with its counterpart organisations in Europe (EUPHA, EPHA, EHMA, EurohealthNet) and in other regions and is an active member of the EU Health Policy Forum and the World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA).

4. As president of a 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 built on general values and principles promoted by ASPHER.

- What values and principles are guiding the Public Health training in Europe?
- In your vision, what is the role of public health in a modern and integrative Europe?
- What do you consider to be the key aspects of PH education for improving the role of PH?
- What are the perspectives for the PH Training domain in the next period and in context of the Health 2020 European Policy for health and well-being?
- Please enumerate some relevant steps of the ASPHER 2020 Strategy production process.

VBM: Preparing public health professionals to work at the European and global level includes consideration of interfaces and synergies between public health functions, competences and performance. Besides analysing the status quo and planning for future needs, education, training, and research are core essentials in the development of public health professionals. The new education technologies i.e. online platforms, multidisciplinary knowledge brokering, and supported search for employment opportunities are shaping the life of modern public health professionals. The potential of higher education programmes has to be based at all levels on state of the art research fostering changes by innovation and creativity. Innovative learning technologies (blended learning) are significant incentives for public health professionals to work together and to develop certain skills in the field of leadership and negotiation for the benefit of health at the local, regional and global level.

The Executive Board of ASPHER has initiated the debate on the strategic plan 2016-2020 at the end of 2013 in order to fulfill its mission and to align with the WHO and EU Strategies for the rest of the 2nd decade of this century. Intensive discussions have been organised during a Delphi process in January and May 2014 agreeing a framework of five strategic objectives specifying ASPHER’s core mission within “education for research and service”. Two
new fields of growing importance in Europe were added, namely “Setting up a public health profession” and “Developing the Global Dimension of Education and Training for Public Health”. Whereas the first links to ASPHER’s lead in implementing EPHO-7 in close collaboration with WHO-EURO, the second underpins ASPHER’s new outreach beyond the European Region.

In a subsequent phase the five strategic objectives were discussed in detail advancing the cohesion of the community of ASPHER and resulting in an operational action plan. I am very happy that after an extensive consultation process we adopted at our Deans and Directors meeting in Jerusalem early June 2015 ASPHER’s 2020 Strategy covering the following strategic objectives:

- Strategic objective 1: Improving quality of academic programmes and CPD for public health
- Strategic objective 2: Strengthening research capacity among all members
- Strategic objective 3: Setting up a public health profession for public health services in Europe
- Strategic objective 4: Developing the global dimension of education and training for public health
- Strategic objective 5: Strengthening governance, management and sustainable development of ASPHER


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, but ASPHER is involved in other fruitful collaborations.

- Please mention some of the joint actions and the plus value expected from the collaboration with EUPHA.
- What about other collaborations/consortium established by ASPHER with other important organizations? Please mention consortium for establishing APHEA, the new agency that represent the guarantee of recognizing and promoting the high quality standards for PH graduate education at European level.

VBM: The way forward has been identified as developing partnerships for better capacity building of public health professionals at the European and global level, which includes ethical considerations of partnerships involved in education and importance of the networking in education. To that extent, ASPHER main partners in Europe are the European Public Health Association (EUPHA), the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA), the European Health Management Association (EHMA) and EuroHealthNet (EHN). In collaboration with these partners, the Agency for Public Health Education Accreditation (APHEA) has been established to, in accordance with the Bologna process; and has started with evaluation of programmes leading to a Master in Public Health. Today besides programme accreditation, APHEA is performing accreditation of training and educational events, and also institutional accreditation. APHEA is committed to assuring and improving the quality of educational activities throughout the European Region and the globe by:

- ensuring greater academic recognition on the global stage,
- promoting transferability of public health education and training,
- increasing employability of public health graduates, and
- attesting the quality of Public Health Workforce training.

ASPHER activities in the field of public health workforce development are support to the European Office of the World Health Organization. Beyond Europe, ASPHER is a regional member of the World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA) in Geneva. An important activity is the creation of regional and national networks/consortia, which can offer fully comprehensive programmes based on their competency profiles; such networks will be able to educate and train future professionals in strong programmes. The schools should also develop and actively maintain alumni programmes to establish and strengthen a culture of shared professionalism. Together with international and national partners – WHO, EU, EUPHA, FPH, EUMS, other - ASPHER will create awareness and mobilise the discussion and planning towards authorisation of public health professionals, in professional bodies (associations/ academies/ chambers/ faculties) in order to create a common professional identity and set aims in professionalization. Ministries of health and national boards of health shall be advocated to develop rules and procedures for authorisation and licensing of public health professionals.

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

Thank you for your kindness to answer to our questions.

Interview conducted by Marius Ciutan