

From the past to the future!

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Editorial

Albania has been forced to follow a long and winding road from the Ottoman Empire through war and dictatorship to the open horizon of today with the perspective of accession to the European Union. Those who had like me the pleasure to work in Albania and enjoy the unbeatable hospitality of our Albanian colleagues, observe with great admiration their devotion to relieve the country from a darker past.

When the editors-in-chief invited me to write an editorial for the new English edition of the Albanian Medical Journal (AMJ), I was deeply moved passing in my memory the last decade of work: It was in May 2002 that the 3rd Conference on Public Health Training and Research has been organised in Tirana by our network of academic institutions in South Eastern Europe. It may be worthwhile to enlist the cities represented: Athens, Belgrade, Bielefeld, Bucharest, Chisinau, Ljubljana, Novi Sad, Podgorica, Prishtina, Sarajevo, Skopje, Sofia, Tirana, Varna, Zagreb (1).

At that time it was not at all self-understandable that colleagues from Serbia met with their colleagues from Albania, Croatia or Slovenia in Tirana. Many fears were to be suppressed - but Public Health proved its capability and also mission to bridge the abysses the Balkan wars had left in the nineties. The more surprising it was that a formal Agreement on Collaboration could be

preliminarily signed (formally executed a few months later at the Opening session of the 24th Annual ASPHER Conference in Zagreb), recognizing the need for sustainable collaboration and

strongly supporting the reconstruction of postgraduate public health training and research based on regional specificities and following international standards in public health education.

Only four years later, in 2006, our Albanian colleagues went a step further organising one of the first summer schools of the Forum for Public Health Training and Research in South Eastern Europe (FPH-SEE) in Saranda, southern Albania. Again, 33 colleagues came from all over the region to study the "Scientific Basis of Public Health". The faculty consisted of

Prof. Bajram Hysa, Tirana, Albania; Prof. Vesna Bjegovic, Belgrade, Serbia; Dr. Gabriela Scintee, Romania; myself and two young doctors, two of the AMJ editors of today, Enver Roshi and Genc Burazeri, in the meantime regular professors at the Medical Faculty of Tirana. There was one presentation which is really memorable when Professor Bjegovic from Serbia presented a SWOT analysis of an Evidence-Based Public Health Policy in Albania. Only a few years ago this would have been unthinkable.

In the following years up to now, six volumes with 249 teaching modules on public health topics have been published (full text available at:

<http://www.snz.unizg.hr/ph-see/publications.htm>) [2], the lecturers in the new under- and postgraduate programmes being the main target group (3). As a most strategic result of the decade of togetherness new Schools of Public Health have been established in Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, and Serbia in addition to the long standing Andrija Stampar School of Public Health in Zagreb, Croatia.

All of them became members of the Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER) and thus the network is literally paving the path especially of the Yugoslavian successor states to European integration.

Where to go from here?

One most important recent development is the new strategy Health 2020 of the European Office of the World Health Organisation and the corresponding European Action Plan for Strengthening Public Health Capacities and Services, adopted a few months ago at the Regional Committee for Europe in September 2012 (4). These two very important documents are grounded on the European agreement about ten Essential Public Health Operations (EPHOs), which underline the central role of Public Health. I may cite EPHO four on "Health Promotion, including action to address social determinants and health inequity" and especially EPHO seven on "Assuring a sufficient and competent public health workforce", together with EPHO ten "Advancing public health research to inform policy and practice". EPHO seven covers the adequacy of schools of public health and all three cycles of the Bologna agreements as well as it underlines the growing importance of Continuing Professional Development (CPD), especially as far distance on-line training is concerned. In the recently published ASPHER survey on profiles and programmes of Schools and Departments of Public Health in Europe (SDPH) [5] we found that there are only 23 or 35% of all participating institutions offering short courses, modules or summer schools, mainly in Public Health and/ or Health Management. Meeting the future challenges in our Century, however, implies profound changes for the public health sciences in terms of continuing inter-professional training (6). The new Schools of Public Health like the one in Tirana can frog-leap to the top of the queue if they take up these latest avenues towards modernity. CPD is supposed to enhance working together, implement multi-professionality in public health practice, and inter-disciplinarity in public health research. But, the capacity of public health institutions in Europe, even adding up Schools and Institutes of Public Health together, is very limited. The median Full Time Equivalent of teaching staff adding up all part-timers does not exceed 20 positions. Vis-a-vis the variation of public health services and professional qualification in the European Region it is certainly difficult to quantify the need for public health professionals. A rough estimate makes use of analyses from the United States (7): Bjegovic-

Mikanovic et al. estimate that for the entire European Region, 783 SDPH of average size are needed if to become comparable to aspired US levels. Adequate capacity to offer CPD would require 182 institutions with an output of 121 certified graduates in average. In other words, national governments and the European Union in particular should take the chance to invest massively into public health. This would also be in line with the global Non-Communicable Disease Strategy of the United Nations (8) with its focus on an integrated preventive/ curative approach to be implemented at the frontline of primary health care, embedded in the community.

For the countries of South Eastern Europe it seems that the 2010s offer a quite straightforward highway for improving population health remarkably. The stage is set - it is up to the public health professionals in Albania and the government to take the chances.

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