

The Public Health Discipline: Career at the Crossroads

Banstola A¹

¹School of Health and Allied Sciences, Pokhara University

INTRODUCTION

In health profession there are many career options viz. Public Health, Medicine, Bioinformatics, Pharmacy, Nursing, Dentistry, Neurosciences etc. At this crossroads of career we need to choose the best option that is rewarding as well as challenging, demanding and has wider opportunity. Public Health is such career option that covers these entire attributes. In 1920, C.E.A. Winslow has defined the public health as "the science and art of preventing diseases, prolonging life and promoting physical health and efficiency through organized community efforts." (1)

To let people know that public health affects them on a daily basis and that we are only as healthy as the world we live in; public health is defined as what we, as a society, do collectively to assure the conditions in which people can be healthy. (2) The five core disciplines within public health are: Behavioural Science/Health Education, Biostatistics, Environmental Health Science, Epidemiology, and Health Services Administration. Other core public health areas include Global Health, Maternal and Child Health, Nutrition/Dietetics, and Occupational Health and Safety among others.

Public Health Is Different From Clinical Health

C. Everett Koop says "Health care matters to all of us some of the time, public health matters to all of us all of the time." This gives the real picture of where public health profession stands among other health professions and how it is different from the other health careers. Association of Schools of Public Health (ASPH), US, has differentiated the public health profession with clinical health profession as (3)

Table 1 Distinction between public health and clinical health professions

Public Health	Clinical Health
Population	Individual
Health	Disease
Prevention and Health Promotion	Diagnosis and Treatment

"Public health is the area of health outside the capability of the individual private practitioner and have saved more lives

than any other professional group." (4) Today medical practitioners too place their chief reliance upon the "preventive" medicine. This sounds a bit implausible at the first glance but it is true. Even the surgeon who treats an accidental wound is practicing preventive medicine, since the major aim which he accomplishes is to avert the septic infection which otherwise would follow.

Impact of Public Health

The ten significant achievements in public health from the last century- vaccinations, automotive safety, environmental health, infectious disease control, safer and healthier foods, advances in maternal and child health, fluoridation of drinking water, decline in deaths from coronary heart disease and stroke, recognition of tobacco use as a health hazard, and family planning have improved our quality of life: an increase in life expectancy, worldwide reduction in infant and child mortality, and the elimination or reduction of many communicable diseases. These advances can be accredited to public health initiatives, while medical advances account for less than 4 years. (5)

The Scope and Future of Public Health

The public needs to better understand the vast potential of public health, because they have little idea of its capabilities. Georges C. Benjamin, MD, Executive Director of American Public Health Association says, "People have not connected the dots between what public health does for their well-being and that they do every day." It impacts our life every moment. Public health professionals are trying to change sickness culture into wellness culture embracing secondary and tertiary prevention. So, the attempt to fix the boundaries of the public health program by establishing a distinction between prevention and cure must then in practice lead only to confusion and incertitude. (6)

The scope of public health is very broad, addressing issues ranging from epidemic diseases in its beginning to now addressing the communicable as well as non-communicable diseases including bioterrorism. James Curran, MD, MPH says, "People are starting to understand public health; that what affects our health isn't only our physician, pharmacist or our nurse. It involves a far broader look at society." (7)

CORRESPONDENCE : Amrit Banstola, School of Health and Allied Sciences, Pokhara University, Lekhanath, Nepal.
Email: real_amit@hotmail.com

Public health has become very popular in colleges where public health courses have been instituted. Tribhuvan University-the biggest and the oldest university of Nepal has approximately 240 students currently studying public health. Purbanchal University has around 1354 students and Pokhara University currently has something like 642 undergrads enrolled in the same course. I was attracted to public health because of my interest in health research. My colleagues have entered the field because of their interest in disease investigation, environmental sciences, health administration, data analysis, health policy, and health education. They see themselves in the future as Health researcher, Epidemiologist, Environmental Health and Safety Manager, Health Project Program Manager, Health Scientist, Data Analyst/Biostatistician, Health Economist, Health Educator and District Public Health Officer. Whatsoever the first driving force, all public health professionals are unified to take preventive action in advance of emergence of problems and promoting existing healthy lives. This forces that are converging could well lead public health to pre-empt clinical medicine in the decades ahead as the primary focus of Nepalese health care.

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