

The 2021 European Public Health Conference Statement

The European Public Health Association and partners, meeting at the Virtual European Public Health Conference from 10-12 November 2021, urge all governments to build back better and fairer after the COVID-19 pandemic, and in ways that will limit climate change and its impacts.

We call upon national and international decision-makers to:

- Base decisions and actions on the best available evidence, acknowledging that this may change;
- Invest in health systems, information systems, and a qualified (public) health workforce;
- Acknowledge public health and the public's health as cornerstones for a healthy and functioning society;
- Follow the guiding principles of Health in All Policies to ensure a whole-of-society approach to public health; and
- Focus on reducing health inequalities within and between countries by direct policy action.

Gathering in November 2021, nearly two years after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we can only begin to see the social, economic and health impact this pandemic has had on our society, on our population. Already, we have seen an increase in health inequalities, a loss of focus in controlling the impact of noncommunicable diseases (such as cancer and diabetes), a sometimes nationalistic and pointless battle for vaccines, and poor choices around the use of continued restrictions, rather than evidence-based public health actions. If ever there was a role for public health, it is now, and here, at this conference that public health professionals, from 80 countries, can discuss what worked, what went wrong, and plan what should happen next.

So, what have we learned so far? How can we build back better? For a start, we should build back fairer, taking into account and finally clearly addressing extensive existing health and social inequalities, that have been shown so clearly and exacerbated by the pandemic. We need to invest in health care systems and health care workers, not just when another epidemic comes around the corner, but now and forever. Public health should play a vital role in future planning: environmental policies, most urgently those around climate change, can contribute to the health and wellbeing of all, and all policies, industrial, educational, land-use, agricultural need to engage with health. Solidarity, fairness, inclusivity, and transparency should be important underlying values.

We need to acknowledge in our thoughts, and in our actions, that we live in an integrated world, a world where 'One Health' is the daily reality, and where decisions in one sector ripple

across many others. Without understanding the ecology within which our species lives, and how our choices on food, on energy, on development, on water, affect this, we are doomed to failure.

For certain issues, and pandemics are the clearest example, public health needs to lead. This pandemic, or the next one, should not be a political issue based on division and votes. The ways in which countries responded to COVID-19 were very diverse, but those that held to effective public health responses had lower levels of infection, less pressure on health services, fewer deaths, and a better economic recovery, than those that did not. In Europe, where in many countries COVID-19 was poorly handled, and from where it spread globally, few countries had an effective response.

Public health is one cornerstone of a functioning and healthy society. And public health should be there for everyone, without distinction of gender, ethnic origin, social status. Even when the key principles of public health remain in place, these need to further develop to meet new and pressing needs. There is not one future for public health, there are several possible 'futures' for public health. We, as public health professionals, need to develop and acquire further skills in communication, policy evaluation and evidence analysis. We need to be able to confidently discuss our public health priorities with policymakers at local, regional, national and international level. We need to be able to discuss the health impact of climate change. We must understand what drives and determines peoples' decision-making processes regarding health behaviour and we need to design physical, social, and cultural environments which facilitate and motivate health protective behaviour. We need to be able to work with lawyers, farmers, social scientists, architects, and designers as well as industry.

Digital tools have proven very successful in times of COVID-19 and we need to understand how we can use these digital tools to our advantage. But we also need to be aware of possible negative sides of digitisation, such as breaches of privacy, and the easy dissemination of hatred and lies. The latter are too often targeted at marginalised groups within our societies, and the public health response must include a commitment to equity and justice, two important pillars for public health. Without justice, without equity, the public's health will not be secured, and health inequalities will increase.

The most important we have learned from this pandemic, is the need to have a well-trained, and well-led, public health workforce, one able to distinguish evidence from fake news, able to talk to politicians and civil servants to get things done, and not afraid to stand up for the vulnerable in society. Public health should be in the driving seat if the public's health is at risk.

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For more information, please contact Prof Anthony Staines, host of the 16th EPH Conference, anthony.staines@dcu.ie, or Dr Dineke Zeegers Paget, EUPHA executive director, office@eupha.org.

The European Public Health Association, or EUPHA in short, is an umbrella organisation for public health associations in Europe. Our network of national associations of public health represents around 20'000 public health professionals. Our mission is to facilitate and activate a strong voice of the public health network by enhancing visibility of the evidence and by strengthening the capacity of public health professionals. EUPHA contributes to the preservation and improvement of public health in the European region through capacity and knowledge building. We are committed to creating a more inclusive Europe, narrowing all health inequalities among Europeans, by facilitating, activating, and disseminating strong evidence-based voices from the public health community and by strengthening the capacity of public health professionals to achieve evidence-based change.

EUPHA - European Public Health Association

E-mail office@eupha.org

Internet www.eupha.org

Twitter @EUPHActs

EPH Conference

E-mail office@ephconference.eu

Internet: www.ephconference.eu

Twitter @EPHconference



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