

1.D. Round table: The Moral Mandate of Public Health – Back to Basics

Organised by: UKFPH, EUPHA (ETH)

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The core mission of Public Health is to protect and promote health through the organized efforts of society. The use of political power to achieve public health goals, and the imperatives to improve health and reduce health inequalities, suggest an inherently moral agenda, and thus require a sound moral mandate. However, concerns have arisen about a lack of unified vision and leadership within Public Health, with consequent concerns about heightened threats to the health of the public. Without a firm moral mandate, with pressures and threats to public health systems and services, and with concerns about the diminishing independence and unity of the workforce, there is a real danger that public health becomes just a set of technical specialties directed to serving organizational, political, and corporate interests. This is unsustainable. Lessons from the Ebola outbreak, widening inequalities, growing conflict and disunity, climate change, and other challenges highlight the need for greater appreciation of public health norms, values and approaches, and clear leadership. The recent rise in populism has resulted in questions around science and evidence-based approaches, which are at the heart of public health practice. Senior academics and public health leaders, such as McKee & Stuckler (who are part of the workshop panel) have used case studies and issues from Brexit and the US election to consider implications for public health and the need to respond. There have also been calls by Solomon & Jennings (Hastings Centre, 2017), to recognize that “the values and norms of discourse basic to bioethics are similar to those of constitutional democracy, and concerned with the age-old question, how should we live together?”

The purpose of this workshop is to bring together a multi-disciplinary panel of senior public health and social scientists, practitioners and ethicists, to reflect and consult on ongoing public health challenges and political developments, in light of the moral norms, values and mandate of public health and their implications for policy, research and practice. The threat of populist movements to the public’s health and society is the context in which we will discuss these questions and the particular moral obligations of public health professionals.

The session will include short statements and discussions of the public health mandate, norms and values, and their implications for practice. In particular there will be a discussion of solidarity, justice and interconnectedness as key issues in efforts for a unified vision to tackle hate and exclusion, as well as threats to knowledge and evidence-based practice.

Panel:

- Farhang Tahzib, UK
- Martin McKee, EUPHA
- David Stuckler, EUPHA (Policy)
- John Coggon, UK
- Peter Schröder-Bäck, EUPHA (ETH)

Key messages:

- Public Health is not merely a technical specialty, but a moral enterprise that is founded on values such as justice, interconnectedness and solidarity.
- In these challenging times there is even greater need that Public Health practitioners become explicitly aware of the founding morals of their discipline and reflect them in their practice.