

Development of Public Health Education in Bulgaria

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ABSTRACT

Public health education in Bulgaria has developed strong traditions since the introduction of medical education in the country at the beginning of the 20th century. In the periods before and during the socialist regime, public health training suffered from a lack of integration and comprehensive epidemiological studies, insufficient training in management, and limited involvement of non-medical professionals. During the transition to a market economy after 1989, changes in the national context and the acceptance of modern European trends in health and educational policy became a solid base for further reform of public health education on all levels: undergraduate, postgraduate, and continuing education. Four new academic entities (faculties) for public health training were created in Bulgarian medical universities. The new faculties offering bachelors', masters' and doctoral degree programmes provided the basis for further expansion of public health education and research advancement.

Key Words: Public health, education, health care management, Bulgaria, South East Europe

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THE BULGARIAN CONTEXT

The Republic of Bulgaria is a Southeastern European country with a population of 7,563,710 (2009).¹ In 1989, the country initiated democratic political changes and transitioned to a market economy, as did many other

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Central and Eastern European countries. The restructuring of health care was influenced by two complex factors: the transition from a planned to a market economy and the integration of the country into international structures, most significantly the European Union (EU) accession process. Until the 1990s, the health care system was based on the Soviet “Semashko” model with a hospital care dominated health sector and extensive development—the increase of hospital beds was considered a criterion for measuring quality of health care services. In 1989, Bulgaria had 970.2 hospital beds per 100,000 population (significantly higher as compared to the average of the EU-15 – 777.4 per 100,000) and 313.9 physicians per 100,000 population (compared to the EU-15 average – 276.4 per 100,000).² After 1989, the admission rate of medical students to universities was significantly decreased, followed by a considerable reduction of hospital beds that was initiated in 1998 by giving priority to primary health care. Currently, the hospital beds are 606.9 per 100,000 population and the physician rate is 307.0 per 100,000 (2009),³ as compared to the 530.5 hospital beds per 100,000 and 323.7 physicians per 100,000 in the EU-27 (2008).²

During the transition years after 1989, the health status of the Bulgarian population deteriorated, mortality rates increased (especially among men of working age due to circulatory system diseases), birth rates decreased, and social inequality deepened.⁴ These negative changes as well as poor efficiency of the existing health system defined the need for specialists able to analyse health problems and to develop and implement intervention programmes as solutions. The situation required enhancement of public health education and training.

PUBLIC HEALTH EDUCATION BEFORE 1989: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Public health education and training in Bulgaria is closely related with university education of physicians. Until the beginning of the 20th century, Bulgarian physicians received their medical education and public health training abroad. The first Medical Faculty in Bulgaria was established in 1918 at Sofia University.⁵ The faculty included within its structure a Department of Hygiene. After 1945, four medical institutes were created in other cities in Bulgaria: Plovdiv (1945), Varna (1961), Pleven (1974), and Stara Zagora (1982), all of which were later transformed into medical universities whose educational curricula correspond to a great extent to the state medical education requirements.

The first autonomous Department of Healthcare Organization was created in 1949 in the Medical Faculty in Sofia, and after that in other

medical institutes. In 1964, the departments were renamed as Departments of Social Hygiene, and in 1984, they acquired the title Departments of Social Medicine. These semantic changes reflected the transformations within the curricula with regards to subjects taught.⁶ In the period between 1972 and 1981, the curriculum of subjects taught at the Departments of Social Medicine was broadened by including medical sociology and history of medicine. As of 1982, computer technology training in health care was added to the programme. During the 1990s, the undergraduate medical education included the subjects of social medicine, epidemiology, biostatistics, and history of medicine. Other departments which included public health education were Departments of Infectious Diseases and Epidemiology and Departments of Hygiene and Environmental Health. Postgraduate education was offered only to physicians in the following specialities: Social medicine, Epidemiology of Infectious Diseases, and Hygiene. Many short-term courses for continuing medical education were offered as well.

The tradition of public health training was included from the very inception of medical education in Bulgaria. There were, however, some negative characteristics such as strong medical orientation, emphasis on the physical environment, lack of comprehensive epidemiological studies, insufficient training in management and health promotion, and limited involvement of non-medical professionals in the training.

PERSPECTIVES ON PUBLIC HEALTH EDUCATION AFTER 1989

During the transition years after 1989, the changes in the national context and the acceptance of modern tendencies of European health policy became solid ground for new perspectives on public health education in the country.

The concept of academic public health education for medical students was developed. After the EU Trans-European Mobility Programme for University Studies (Tempus programme) was designed to assist in strengthening higher education during the political transition in Central and Eastern Europe, a Joint European Project (JEP-3604) entitled “Public health disciplines in Bulgaria – support for undergraduate education and training of specialists” was funded from 1992 to 1995. The project had a primary contracting organisation—University of Cambridge (United Kingdom)—along with additional partners: Erasmus University, Rotterdam; University of Edinburgh; and University of Basque Country, Bilbao. All Departments of Social Medicine from Bulgarian medical universities participated in the project, as a result of which the curricula of social medicine were improved

and emphasis was placed on epidemiology of socially significant diseases and health promotion. Another component of the project focused on specialization training of young academic staff in partnering universities.

In 1993, for the first time in Bulgaria, the Medical University of Varna started a new academic programme in Health Care Management in collaboration with the University of Maastricht and the University of Manchester through a joint participation in the EU Tempus Project (JEP-09916-95) entitled “Restructuring of University Education in Health Care Management”. The programme addressed the need to train a new type of professional capable of dealing with administration and management of health care establishments under the conditions of the emerging market. In 2004, a similar programme was developed at the Medical University of Sofia.

In 1996, the Medical Universities of Sofia and Pleven started undergraduate programmes designed to improve the administrative and business skills of nurses occupying managerial positions. Successful graduating students are awarded a Bachelor’s degree in Nursing Management. Due to the immense interest and need for such training, the programme was introduced in all other medical universities in the country.

In 2001, the Council of Ministers decided to create autonomous academic public health entities (faculties) within the structure of medical universities, and Faculties of Public Health were created in Sofia (2001), Varna (2001), Pleven (2004), and Plovdiv (2007). This demonstrated governmental understanding of the need for developing public health training. The new faculties became bases for further expansion of public health education and research advancement. Through the membership of these faculties in the Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER), they were exposed to the European standards for quality of education.

After Bulgaria signed the Bologna Declaration,⁷ the three-tiered higher education model (Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Doctoral degrees) was introduced on account of the amendments and additions put forward in the new Higher Education Act.⁸ Education in public health also adapted to this model through development of Health Care Management and Nursing Management programmes with the corresponding degree levels. For the first time, a newly established Master’s programme in Health Care Management was offered to professionals with medical and non-medical backgrounds, who were already employed within the public health system.

Public health training is of great importance not only for the management of health care establishments, but also for managing the growing health problems of the population and in the development of new public health

policy. In order to face these challenges and especially to respond to the growing professionalisation in the fields of disease prevention and health promotion, the Faculty of Public Health of the Medical University of Varna developed a Master of Public Health (MPH) programme in 2001. The MPH programme was developed according to the existing European standards within the framework of the ASPHER Open Society Institute (OSI) project "Quality Development of Public Health Teaching Programmes in Central and Eastern Europe".⁹ A number of young faculty members with training abroad (including the Braun School of Public Health in Jerusalem) were integrated into the teaching staff, and a recently published textbook "The New Public Health: An Introduction for the 21st Century" (Tulchinsky, Varavikova, 2000)¹⁰ was translated and published into the Bulgarian language and made available to students.

The mission of the MPH programme is to provide postgraduate training to public health specialists from a wide range of health related professional backgrounds, so that the graduates will be able to define, assess critically, and resolve public health problems independently and based on scientific evidence. The aims of the MPH are as follows:

- to provide high level postgraduate education;
- to conduct research and generate new findings, the application of which aim at improvement of public health, and strengthening of health capacity and services for communities;
- to inform policy debate, disseminate health information and increase awareness of public health.

The pilot MPH programme was initiated in Varna in 2001. The training course lasted two years and classes were offered in a part-time format. The training process was organised on a modular basis, according to a strictly defined schedule. A few months later, a similar programme was developed at the Medical University of Sofia.¹¹ Both the programme offered in Varna and that in Sofia have almost identical curricula including the following six modules: Introduction to and Theoretical Bases of Public Health; Modern Epidemiology and Statistical Methods in Public Health; Environmental Health; Health Policy Strategies; Health Economics, Health Care Management and Marketing, Information Systems in Public Health; and Health Promotion. At the end of the programme the students have to prepare and defend a thesis on a topic related to public health and their professional interests. Upon successful completion of the programme students are awarded a Master of Public Health degree.

In October of 2004, the MPH programme in Varna successfully underwent the ASPHER Public Health Education European Review (PEER), which provided a high quality assessment of the programme.

Postgraduate education in the field of public health is generally carried out in the form of specialization and continuing education. Specializations are carried out in accordance with the Bulgarian Ministry of Health Ordinance for Obtaining a Specialty in the Health Care System,¹² and last three to four years. The specialties in the field of public health are: Social Medicine and Health Care Management; Hygiene; Hygiene of Children and Adolescents; Occupational health; Nutrition and Dietetics; Disaster Medicine; Epidemiology of Infectious Diseases; and Health Care Economics.

Continuing education of working professionals has been intensified through short-term courses on specific public health problems. For example, the first course on hospital management in the country was organised in 1990-1991 by the Medical University of Varna. Through the project PHARE BG 9301/02/02 "Training of executive hospital administration staff", four centres for training of municipal health administrators were created in the country. During the period 1996-1997, summer courses in epidemiology were organized within the Tempus programme with participants from all over the country. Since then, a large number of short courses have been offered yearly.

The development of public health education has found strong academic and government support aimed to train and prepare specialists able to contribute to the implementation of the National Health Strategy and national programmes targeting specific public health areas for overcoming the negative tendencies in the health status of the Bulgarian population. One of the priorities of the National Health Strategy (2001)¹³ is to "improve the quality of education and convertibility of medical education and post-graduate training with regard to the new priorities in health care and the EU free movement of people policy." This priority should bridge the gap between the traditional medical education and the emerging field of health management.¹⁴ Because of the decline of the demographic, social, and health indicators in the country, the Ministry of Health developed the new National Health Strategy (2008),¹⁵ which focused again on the modern education of human resources for health and the need for improved health promotion.

An additional stimulus for obtaining education in the field of public health is the requirement in the Health Establishments Act,¹⁶ according to which managerial positions in health care establishments can be attained only by persons with an additional qualification in Health Care Management, and Nursing Management.

CONCLUSION

- The new health and education legislation introduced in Bulgaria provided a solid foundation for public health training on all levels: undergraduate, postgraduate, and continuing education.
- The academic programmes offering bachelors', masters' and doctoral degrees became bases for further expansion of public health education, research advancement, and cooperation with academic, research, and policy institutions in Europe and around the world.
- With the advancement of health care reform in Bulgaria the role of public health training became crucial in terms of training public health leaders capable of formulating and implementing adequate public health policies.

Acronyms list:

ASPHER = The Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region

JEP = Joint European Project

MPH = Master of Public Health

Tempus Programme = Trans-European Mobility Programme for University Studies

Conflicts of Interest: None declared.

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