

Insights on public health

Jon Eyers continues his surfing of the world wide web and identifies some leading websites for reliable resources in the field of public health



Public health today has not perhaps received the recognition it is due for its role in eradicating disease and in improving the health of populations. In one sense it is the backroom medical specialty which today gives way to the popular high-profile specialties in clinical medicine, but historically it can be argued to have had a greater impact on better health. The great 19th century public health campaigns in Europe of providing drains, clean water, and vaccination led to a dramatic reduction in mortality from infectious diseases, and today it has – at least in the Western world – made significant advances in the prevention of smoking, cancer, and cardiovascular disease.

African countries, however, have had to concentrate on the more urgent HIV, TB, and malaria epidemics where much of the health budgets and aid funding have been concentrated. However, as is now well-known, there is a large herd of elephants in the room, which is the looming crisis in Africa of chronic disease, cancer, mental health, and mortality from traffic accidents among other unaddressed concerns.¹ Coupled with this is the worrying lack of progress in some areas in achieving the health-related Millennium Development Goals.^{2,3} It is public health specialists who will have the task of tackling these concerns and the increasingly overburdened health system infrastructure.

Part of public health's success can be attributed to its drawing on the talents of other disciplines, such as civil engineering, sociology, economics, and policy making. The following small selection of resources in public health reflect this multidisciplinary approach:

- Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Open Courseware (<http://ocw.jhsph.edu>) – Courses in public health open to all in areas such as Injury prevention, Environment, Public health preparedness, Mental health, Health policy. Each course offers syllabus outline, lecture materials with slides and audio, readings, assignments, and projects.
- Health Manager's Toolkit (<http://erc.msh.org/toolkit>) – Provides a selection of tools for health professionals to offer high quality and sustainable health services. The tools are organised by subject area, which include Community health services, Drug and supply

management, Health policy and reform, Monitoring and evaluation, etc. Each includes spreadsheet templates, forms for data gathering, checklists, guidelines, and self-assessment tools.

- Demographic & Health Surveys (Measure DHS) (<http://www.measuredhs.com>) – Provides a wide range of reliable health data for most African countries in which comparative tables can be compiled by country and by a number of important health indicators. Most countries now have several reports over a number of years.
- The Lancet's Public Health Collection (<http://www.thelancet.com/collections/public-health?collexcode=125>) – A wide range of over 750 key articles from 2006 to present in public health focusing on low- and middle-income countries – most are available free, or otherwise available through Hinari (<http://www.who.int/hinari/en>). See also its Global Health Series (<http://www.thelancet.com/global-health-series>).
- Selected African Public Health Journals from African Index Medicus (<http://indexmedicus.afro.who.int/Journals/Indexj.htm>) – See also the new, open access Journal of Public Health in Africa (<http://www.publichealthinafrica.org/index.php/jphia>).
- The Trials Register of Promoting Health Interventions (TRoPHI) (<http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/webdatabases/SearchIntro.aspx>) – A worldwide database of randomised and non-randomised interventions in health promotion and public health searchable by country, health focus, population group, intervention characteristics.
- The WWW Virtual Library: Public Health (University of New South Wales, Australia) (<http://www.sphcm.med.unsw.edu.au/sphcmweb.nsf/page/Africa>) – Subject and geographical listings. See also: Health Information and Health Organizations on Africa (Columbia University) (http://library.columbia.edu/content/libraryweb/indiv/area/cuvl/african_studies/intlorgs/health.html).

References

1. The Health of the People: The African Regional Health Report. WHO Regional Office for Africa, 2006 (http://whqlibdoc.who.int/afro/2006/9290231033_rev_eng.pdf).
2. Towards Reaching the Health-related Millennium Development Goals: Progress Report and the Way Forward. Report of the Regional Director. WHO Regional Office for Africa, 2010 (<http://www.afro.who.int/en/rdo/news/2871-towards-reaching-the-health-related-mdgs.html>).
3. Assessing Progress in Africa toward the Millennium Development Goals. United Nations, 2010 (<http://web.undp.org/afrika/documents/mdg/full-report.pdf>).

As a member of HIFA2015 (<http://www.hifa2015.org/>), John Eyers believes one of the biggest challenges for improved health in less-developed countries is ensuring that equal access to appropriate and evidence-based health information is made available to all.