

“PUBLIC HEALTH, THE NEW PERSPECTIVE: EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCE IN STUDYING PUBLIC HEALTH IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE”

*1st Conference of Public Health Students in South Eastern Europe (SEE)
Skopje, Macedonia, December 15-17, 2005*

Development of professional education in public health is vital for countries in transition with high morbidity and mortality from preventable diseases. Public health problems can be managed by implementing public health strategies: prevention of diseases and health promotion. Several new Schools of Public Health in SEE have been established to provide postgraduate training of a multi-disciplinary group of professionals from medical, economics, law, teachers, sanitary engineers, administrators, sociology, anthropology, general arts and science and many other disciplines. The mission of such SPH is to prepare a critical mass of public health professionals who are competent in public health teaching, research, providing public health services and analysis/formulation of national health policy. The objectives of public health training and continuing education are to prepare target-oriented public health practitioners, researchers, policy analysts, managers and decision-makers; to promote public health research and health policy analysis and to advocate and promote health-related issues in public policy. These can be achieved by post-graduate training in a multi-faculty academic setting; multi-disciplinary approach; problem-oriented skills training to identify targets and problem-solving management approaches and link education, research and service in public health.

The Center of Public Health within the Medical Faculty-Skopje, was given a chance to host the 1st conference of Public Health Students in SEE with the mission to provide a forum for the exchange of first experiences with the new postgraduate study programmes, the expectations of students and the suitability of their newly acquired competencies for a career development as health professionals. The conference was co organized with the Stability Pact for Public Health Collaboration in South Eastern Europe. Apart from MPH students and teachers from the host centre, there were student participants from Belgrade, Banja Luka, Podgorica, Sofia, Varna, Bucharest, Tirana and Zagreb, as well as teachers from Belgrade, Zagreb and Bielefeld. It was a great opportunity for students and teachers to share experiences, career opportunities and characteristics of their programs.

Conference venue was Hotel Continental, Skopje, on December 16th and 17th. The conference activities were divided in three sessions; the first and the second session were held on December 16th and the third one was held on December 17th. The first, opening session, saw a foreword by the Dean of the Medical Faculty-Skopje, Prof. Magdalena Zanteva-Naumoska, stressing the importance of public health training in undergraduate and postgraduate curricula of the Medical Faculties. It was followed by addressing of Prof. Jovanka Karadzinska-Bislimovska, Coordinator of Centre of Public Health-

Skopje, and Prof. Ulrich Laaser, Coordinator of Stability Pact for public health Collaboration in SEE. They both have stressed the significance of such conference, being the first one completely dedicated to the MPH students, where they can exchange experiences, give conclusions and provide recommendations. Also, they have pointed out the importance of spreading the public health network and closer collaboration of Centres and Schools of Public Health. The second part of the opening session was dedicated to give a overview of development of Public Health in SEE since year 2000, through the development of the Macedonian centre of Public Health as a example. This was presented by 4 teachers from the Chair of Social Medicine, Centre of Public Health-Skopje. The first presenter, Prof. Doncho Donev, has given a detailed look on the social and political specificities of the SEE region countries, health sector reforms and public health needs in SEE countries and about the concept and philosophy of the new public health. This was followed by look on the Initial activities & Milestones for Development of PH Cooperation in SEE Region, and the constitution of the Macedonian Center of Public Health. The second presenter, Prof. Mome Spasovski, has stressed the importance of cooperation with various domestic and international factors, essential for establishing and sustainability of newly promoted centers and schools of public health. It was presented through the example of cooperation between the chair of Social Medicine and SMDP project of CDC, Atlanta, USA. The third presenter, Assoc. Prof. Fimka Tozija, has focused on the connectivity of merging health care reforms in Macedonia with development of School of Public Health, and the strong political, institutional support and personal commitment of all the relevant sides in the process of SPH development, with the strategic goals and objectives for their fulfilment. The last presenter from the Chair of Social Medicine, Assoc. Prof. Elena Kosevska, has outlined the Macedonian public health policy and some health promotion activities since 2000, and the role of SPH in health promotion development.

The first part of the second session was dedicated for presentations from the Macedonian MPH students. Three MPH students from the first generation (2003/2004) have given their opinion on different themes. The first of presenters, Brankica Mladenovic, has overviewed her own expectations from enrolling the MPH program, with the individual, community and global expectations, finishing with the positive self-assessment, at the end of her studies. The second presentation, prepared by Lejla Rusevska, was aimed to express students' experiences upon finishing the MPH studies, by stressing out the improvements and new skills development gained from the MPH studies. The final presentation by Katerina Venovska, was aimed to give MPH students career perspectives, with several practical examples on optimizing personal characteristics with professional obligations in different public health fields.

The second part of the session was student group work on 4 different appointed themes: (I) Students' expectations; (II) Students' experiences; (III) Students' career perspectives; and (IV) Students' recommendations. All the participants were divided in four heterogeneous groups, with Prof. Jovanka Karadzinska-Bislimovska, Prof. Ulrich Laaser, Prof. Vesna Bjugovic and Assoc. Prof. Fimka Tozija facilitating the group discussions. All the groups were to prepare power point presentations of up to 10 slides, and a person

from each group was appointed to present their group recommendation on the third session.

On the beginning of the third session, Prof. Luka Kovacic, Director of “Andrija Stampar” SPH - Zagreb, Croatia, has given a presentation about master programs at Andrija Stampar School of Public Health and managing the changes of the curriculum by converting the existing Master programs into a modular format, in line with the European Credit Transfer System standards (ECTS). Four steps, necessary for conducting the change, were recognized: needs assessment; list of competences and learning objectives; review of the present Master programs and curriculum analysis and modularization. Each of these steps were described in details, with practical description of the Andrija Stampar SPH decision on the format of Master studies and the open questions commencing from these changes. Prof. Kovacic’s presentation was followed by reports from the 4 working groups, giving views on their expectations, experiences, career perspectives and presenting their recommendations to professors, to the schools, institutions and themselves.

On the closure of the conference, it was concluded that, despite being the first conference dedicated to the MPH students, it was success, with positive reactions from all the participants; it was a excellent opportunity for graduated and current MPH students coming from various educational settings to share experiences; to express their expectations from the newly acquired competencies, to feel free to give recommendations to their teachers for the career opportunities; converting the masters programs in modular format may prove beneficial; such conferences may strengthen the public health network in SEE; there should be more such conferences. Prof. Laaser has suggested an opportunity that students’ public health network in SEE should be linked with the Forum for public health in South Eastern Europe.

Common conclusion was:

- 1) The successful 1st students conference on Public Health in SEE should be repeated regularly.
- 2) The SEE student conference should link to the ASPHER MPH student forum.
- 3) The SEE student conference may also be linked to the FPH-SEE.
- 4) There should be an initiative in SEE to inform potential employers, especially community administrations on public health qualifications.
- 5) Students and career mobility should be supported by specific programs.
- 6) A survey of alumni students regarding their post-study professional experience should be organized in SEE.