

EDITORIAL/EDITORIALE

Global health, international health and public health: which relationship?

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Riassunto

Salute globale, salute internazionale e sanità pubblica: quale relazione?

Nella comunità scientifica internazionale è sempre più acceso il dibattito sulla salute globale, e su quali affinità esistano fra questa, la sanità pubblica e la salute internazionale.

Passando attraverso le definizioni sviluppate nella letteratura internazionale, si mettono in evidenza i punti di contatto e le differenze e si illustra la definizione di salute globale fornita dalla Rete Italiana per l'Insegnamento della Salute Globale.

Si sottolinea, infine, la necessità di inserire l'approccio di salute globale all'interno della formazione dei futuri medici, e in particolare degli igienisti, con l'obiettivo di fornire agli attuali e futuri professionisti sanitari le competenze per affrontare a livello locale le sfide poste dalla globalizzazione.

Definition of global health vs public health

Over the past decades, the world has seen a rapid progress towards economic and cultural globalization, through the reduction of barriers to international trade, the increasing movement of capital and investment, coupled with a quick development of information and communication technologies and a facilitation of travel.

The traditional paradigm of health care, with its bio-medical focus on disease-based and episodic acute-care

interventions, has been more and more questioned; many authors and institutions, included WHO, are recognizing the key role played by social determinants in influencing the health status of individuals and populations. Globalization has given a further impulse to the theory of social determinants of health (1, 10).

In addition, factors influencing health are no longer confined within national boundaries and individual states, and the response to these factors cannot be addressed only by countries' domestic institutions. Issues such as the global economic crisis, climate change, emerging

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and re-emerging diseases patterns and the increasing prevalence of chronic diseases affect all countries. As the former director general of the World Health Organization Dr Brundtland stated “the separation between domestic and international health problems is no longer useful” (4).

Within this context, global health emerged as a new paradigm of health and several authors have tried to provide a definition of its scope and features, in order to reach an agreement on the approaches that must be taken, the skills needed and the ways resources should be used.

In particular, global health has been constantly seen as linked to public health both for the final goals, the strategies adopted and the underlying assumptions. We will hereby provide an overview of some of the definitions developed by the international community.

The Consortium of Universities for Global Health (CUGH) in the USA adopted the following definition of Global Health: “*Global Health is an area for study, research, and practice that places a priority on **improving health and achieving equity in health** for all people worldwide. Global health emphasizes transnational health issues, determinants, and solutions; involves many disciplines within and beyond the health sciences and promotes interdisciplinary collaboration; and is a synthesis of population based prevention with individual-level clinical care*” (8).

Jeffrey Koplan and colleagues recognize that global health derives from both public health and international health, which, in turn, evolved from hygiene and tropical medicine (8).

The three entities (global health, public health and international health) are all focused on prevention and on populations’ health, rather than on the health of individuals, and they concentrate on guaranteeing health of the most vulnerable and underserved populations, putting

emphasis on health as a public good. There is therefore a focus on a community approach, the importance of the concept of health as a human right and the need to reach equity in health. All the three entities make use of multi-professional and interdisciplinary approaches, and facilitate the participation of several stakeholders.

There is, however, a clear distinction between international health, which focuses on health-related issues that cross international borders, with an emphasis on reinforcing health in developing countries, and global health, which is concerned with issues affected by transnational determinants such as climate change or urbanization, or solutions that can have an impact at the global level. According to this definition of global health, both determinants and solutions are global and transnational, but we have to specify that they can have different local effects according to the context. Thus, global does not refer to the location of problems, but to their scope, which is wider and addresses the wider determinants of health, also at the local level.

In a letter published on the Lancet, Linda Fried and colleagues, representing the Association of Schools of Public Health Global Health Committee declare that global health and public health are indistinguishable. The two disciplines adopt the same definition of health, not seen merely as the absence of disease, and they address the root causes of ill-health through “a broad array of scientific, social, cultural, and economic strategies”. Global and public health are therefore seen by the authors as a single field with already validated approaches, systems and technologies, which need to continue advancing (6).

Robert Beaglehole and Ruth Bonita define global health as “a collaborative trans-national research and action for promoting health for all” (3).

This short definition contains some key terms which provide a framework for action in global health, reinforcing again the close connection between global and public health. “Collaborative” stresses the intersectorial collaboration and the involvement of different institutions in addressing global health issues and its determinants, as well as it happens in public health work. “Trans-national” emphasises again the fact that the effects of global health issues are experienced within countries, although the work is usually based on national public health institutions. It focuses on research to develop an evidence-base for policy, especially research highlighting the effects of the determinants of health, and on developing action for health promotion. Finally it has a clear reference to Alma Ata Declaration, seeing global health “at the forefront of the resurgence of interest in multi-sectorial approaches to health improvement and the need to strengthen primary health care as the basis of all health systems”.

Education and training on global health for public health professionals

As stated by Hogan and Haines in an article published on the *Journal of Public Health* in 2011 (7), “the need to rebalance the focus on disease-centred models with social models of health that recognize the influence of wider determinants is now evident”, and those working in improving public health will therefore need the knowledge and skills to deal with complex problems that bridge the gaps between biological, environmental and social sciences.

The importance of learning about the determinants of health is increasingly recognized and many schools of public health and universities worldwide have

therefore created new courses dealing with the major global health topics, covering areas such as global health politics, health diplomacy, global trade and health and global environmental change.

Global health training, however, should also continue exposing students to established public health subjects, including epidemiology, health economics, policy analysis and infectious disease control, which are key to addressing global health issue (9).

According to Catherine Bateman and colleagues, who presented their viewpoint on bringing global issues to medical teaching on the *Lancet* (2), including global health in medical curriculum may also have other direct benefits for the training of health professionals. For example, nowadays several doctors express their interest to travel and work abroad, including working in international health (development and humanitarian aid), and for them some level of global-health knowledge would be essential.

According to Bateman, training on global health may also channel students into different modes of thinking and responding to health problems, aiding the general development of a health professional. Training on global health can provide “the ability to appreciate diversity, challenge prejudice, analyse change and the forces that shape society”.

The Italian Network for Global Health Education

In Italy there has been an increasing attention to global health within academic institutions and health professionals. The Italian Network for Global Health Education (*Rete Italiana per l’Insegnamento sulla Salute Globale - RIISG*) was established in March 2010 with the aim to promote the development

of training curricula in global health in Italian Medical Faculties and for the continuing medical education (5).

According to RIISG, global health is meant to be a new paradigm for health and health care, grounded in the theory of health determinants. Such an approach, based on the principles stated in the Alma Ata declaration and backed by broad evidence, can be applied to disease prevention and treatment, as well as to health promotion, for both individuals and populations.

The main focus of global health concerns the health status of world population and its socio-economic, political, demographic, juridical and environmental determinants, as well as the relationship between globalisation and health in terms of equity, human rights, sustainability and international diplomacy. Due to the complexity of such issues, the global health approach is necessarily a trans-disciplinary and multimethod one, built on the contribution of natural and social sciences and the humanities.

Adopting a transnational view, global health points out health inequalities both within and between countries, framing them through the lens of social justice. Global health is not merely an academic field: fostering an ethics of social accountability for institutions, professionals and individuals involved, it encompasses the fields of research, practice and education. Driven by ethics and oriented to the needs of the population, in particular marginalised groups, it aims at producing change in the community and in the whole society, bringing evidence into practice thus reducing the know-do gap.

Building on the work advanced by the RIISG, also the National Council of Hygiene's Residents (Consulta Nazionale degli Specializzandi in Igiene e Medicina Preventiva) has recently presented a

proposal in order to include global health training in the curriculum of Hygiene's Residency, which is currently under development.

We believe in the importance of continuing working to build competencies in global health, in order to broad the local view of Italian public health community with this global approach. Both RIISG's work and the proposal developed by the National Council of Hygiene's Residents represent an innovative starting point to achieve this aim.

Abstract

The international scientific community has recently seen a growing debate on global health, and what similarities exist between this, public health and international health. Going through the definitions of global health found in the literature, we will highlight points of contact and differences, and discuss the definition of global health provided by the Italian Network Global Health Education.

Finally, we will stress the need to incorporate the global health approach in the training of future medical doctors, in particular public health specialists, with the aim of providing current and future health professionals with the skills to deal with the challenges posed by globalization at the local level.

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