The Federation's Pages

WFPHA: World Federation of Public Health Associations

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14th World Congress on Public Health in Kolkata, India

The Indian Public Health Association and the World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA) organized the 14th World Congress on Public Health in Kolkata, 11–15 February 2015. Under the theme *Healthy People, Healthy Environment*, the Congress brought together public health professionals, academics, and practitioners from around the world. In Kolkata, a city with a rich history of public health interventions, delegates from more than 70 countries participated in the Congress. To bring the history into the conference and to provide context for participants, the lead organizer from India, Dr Madhumita Dobe, prepared and published a carefully documented *History of Public Health in Calcutta: A Journey from 1858 to 1911*. Conference organizers distributed copies to every registrant (See box below).

The World Congress in Kolkata highlighted challenges to human health around the world. Delegates engaged in debates and discussions about links between human health and social, economic, and environmental determinants. In reaction to conference participants, WFPHA formulated a clear declaration for change: See the full Declaration at: www.14wcph.org/pdf/kolkata-call-to-action-v9.pdf. Consistent themes emerged: mainstreaming health policies, reinforcing a focus on health equity, and strengthening leadership and participation in public health.

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The WFPHA, with Headquarters in Geneva, maintains official relations with the World Health Organization (WHO). Its overall goal is to promote effective health practices and policy while underpinning work of national public health associations worldwide.

In addition to providing a space for the established public health community to engage with these issues and challenges, the Congress held a two-day student conference. It generated wide interest, international participation, and a great platform for students to learn, interact, and prepare for careers in public health.

The Congress reaffirmed that the public health community needs to mobilize, and assert its values in the face of both new and old challenges to human health. Growing importance of economic factors that affect public health; worldwide presence of armed conflict, of migration in its various forms, as well as climate change are just a few examples that coincide with the enduring problems such as sanitation and disease surveillance.

The Congress in Kolkata provoked reflection and re-energized attending public health professionals. WFPHA urges the world's public health community to commit and contribute; to carrying the declarations and intentions from Kolkata into effective action.

History of Public Health in Calcutta:¹ A Journey from 1858 to 1911

The elegant book catalogues the health-threatening conditions under which the local India population lived during the Colonial years – characterized at first by overwhelming presence of refuse, excrement, and foul water, lack of drainage, and persistent disease. The author, Madhumita Dobe, traces environmental developments intended to protect health – some increasingly systematic means for:

- dumping garbage outside the centre of the city
- drainage of fetid waters
- sewage disposal, provision of water
- establishment of a crematory or crematorium to incinerate human carcasses and those of other animals, many of which had previously been left on the streets

The text spells out the trajectory of several key diseases: cholera, smallpox, malaria, plague, and leprosy.

Dobe tracks the influence of the East India Company, of the committees, laws, and the municipal corporation that assumed responsibility for

environmental interventions. How did the understanding of threats to human health evolve? The book reviews everything from weather to the epidemiology of disease transmission and specific pathogens. Kolkata was early to introduce variolation against smallpox and treatment for Hansen's Disease (leprosy).

The book takes readers through challenges and efforts to assure food safety, to regulate and relocate *Offensive and Dangerous Trades* including: tanneries, oil, catgut, and saltpetre refineries. The building of hospitals and dispensaries, then a medical college, brings readers into Kolkata's modern era. Dobe ends the book summarizing the very long tradition of gathering population statistics. The numbers reveal enormous growth of the city through the period. The first census (1866) showed the city's population to total 378 066 and to consist of Hindus (239 380), Muhammedans (113 365), and so called 'Europeans', including Americans, Africans, Australasians (11 224). By 1911, when King George V came to be crowned King of India, the population of Calcutta had grown to 896 067; there were more deaths than births, but immigration meant the city's population continued to grow. The 'nerve center' of India then shifted to Delhi, when the King announced he planned to move of the colony's capital to Delhi.

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¹Kolkata was called Calcutta during the Colonial era.