The Federation's Pages

WFPHA: World Federation of Public Health Associations

www.wfpha.org

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Why should *health* be at the core of future developments globally? And how? Profound and carefully reasoned programmatic ideas have been put forward in the past. They constitute a rich history and each has made a different contribution. Now, Richard Horton, Robert Beaglehole, Ruth Bonita and colleagues propose the *manifesto*, 'From public to planetary health', initially published in *The Lancet* (see <http://www.lancet-journals.com/planetary-health>). The authors wanted to reach out to the world's public health community and came to us. Thus, we welcome Robert Beaglehole from Auckland, New Zealand to the Federation's Pages of the *Journal of Public Health Policy*. Dr Beaglehole, his co-authors, and we, the Federation, are eager for your comments and thoughts. How do you see this manifesto? We would like to invite you to continue the discussion.

The content of The Federation's Pages is selected and edited by the WFPHA and not reviewed by *JPHP*.

Planetary health and the World Federation of Public Health Associations

Background

The manifesto 'From public to planetary health' (<http://www.lancet-journals.com/planetary-health>), reproduced below, has two justifications. First, there has long been concern at the state of public health globally. We began writing on this issue almost 20 years ago. Little has changed over the last two decades; public health professionals remain marginalised far from the centre of decision making. Furthermore, even as our knowledge of health determinants has widened, in many countries the scope of public health practice has narrowed, so that it confines itself to purely managerial issues. The recent political attention to global health issues is welcomed, but this has been largely constrained by the urgency of meeting the health Millennium Development Goals and determining the successors.

The second and even more pressing justification is the rapidly increasing evidence that human-induced environmental damage has the potential to seriously compromise the ability of the planet to sustain life in all its diversity. Climate change is only the most topical of the manifold global environmental changes. The recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report is likely to confirm that a 2 degree Celsius rise in the earth's temperature is now very likely. Other threats include competition for scarce water resources, loss of habitats, and depletion of nutrients in soil.

In summary, not only has public health failed to fulfil its potential for promoting the health of all populations, it has not yet responded to the immediate challenges facing our planet. Not only has the golden age of public health not been reached, there is a danger that it may not arrive in time to respond to the potentially catastrophic threats to the planet.

The Manifesto

From public to planetary health: A manifesto¹

This manifesto for transforming public health calls for a social movement to support collective public health action at all levels of society – personal, community, national, regional, global, and planetary. Our aim is to respond to the threats we face: threats to human health and wellbeing, threats to the sustainability of our civilisation, and threats to the natural and human-made systems that support us. Our vision is for a planet that nourishes and sustains the diversity of life with which we coexist and on which we depend. Our goal is to create a movement for planetary health.

Our audience includes health professionals and public health practitioners, politicians and policy makers, international civil servants working across the UN and in development agencies, and academics working on behalf of communities. Above all, our audience includes every person who has an interest in their own health, in the health of their fellow human beings, and in the health of future generations.

The discipline of public health is critical to this vision because of its values of social justice and fairness for all, and its focus on the collective actions of interdependent and empowered peoples and their communities. Our objectives are to protect and promote health and wellbeing, to prevent disease and disability, to eliminate conditions that harm health and wellbeing, and to foster resilience and adaptation. In achieving these objectives, our actions must respond to the fragility of our planet and our obligation to safeguard the physical and human environments within which we exist.

Planetary health is an attitude towards life and a philosophy for living. It emphasises people, not diseases, and equity, not the creation of unjust societies. We seek to minimise differences in health according to wealth, education, gender, and place. We support knowledge as one source of social transformation, and the right to realise, progressively, the highest attainable levels of health and wellbeing.

Our patterns of overconsumption are unsustainable and will ultimately cause the collapse of our civilisation. The harms we continue to inflict on our planetary systems are a threat to our very existence as a species. The gains made in health and wellbeing over recent centuries, including through public health actions, are not irreversible; they can easily be lost, a lesson we have failed to learn from previous civilisations. We have created an unjust global economic system that favours a small, wealthy elite over the many who have so little.

The idea of unconstrained progress is a dangerous human illusion: success brings new and potentially even more dangerous threats. Our tolerance of neoliberalism and transnational forces dedicated to ends far removed from the needs of the vast majority of people, and especially the most deprived and vulnerable, is only deepening the crisis we face. We live in a world where the trust between us, our institutions, and our leaders, is falling to levels incompatible with peaceful and just societies, thus contributing to widespread disillusionment with democracy and the political process.

An urgent transformation is required in our values and practices based on recognition of our interdependence and the interconnectedness of the risks we face. We need a new vision of cooperative and democratic action at all levels of society and a new principle of planetism and wellbeing for every person on this Earth – a principle that asserts that we must conserve, sustain, and make resilient the planetary and human systems on which health

depends by giving priority to the wellbeing of all. All too often governments make commitments but fail to act on them; independent accountability is essential to ensure the monitoring and review of these commitments, together with the appropriate remedial action.

The voice of public health and medicine as the independent conscience of planetary health has a special part to play in achieving this vision. Together with empowered communities, we can confront entrenched interests and forces that jeopardise our future. A powerful social movement based on collective action at every level of society will deliver planetary health and, at the same time, support sustainable human development.

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Martin McKee, and Stig Wall

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Reference

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Reactions to the manifesto

We have been pleased and surprised by the positive response to the manifesto. Over 4000 people have signed in support. Of course, not all comments were positive, although many of these were constructive – see panel. Box 1

Next Steps and the Role of the WFPHA

We are now formulating plans to take the manifesto to the next step; this article is timely and may stimulate further discussions.

Here are our first suggestions, all of which require further discussion:

1. In association with key actors, develop a strategy to place planetary health at the centre of the debate on the post 2015 development agenda.
2. Mobilise global awareness and buy-in at all levels of society of the importance of planetary health, including active use of social media.
3. Mobilise support from the global public health community, working with and through the WFPHA as well as its regional and national member organisations and counterparts, and through Schools of Public Health. The European Public Health Association (<http://www.eupha.org/site/publications.php>), the Swedish Association of Social Medicine (<http://www.social-medicin.se/>) and the Swedish Society of Medicine (www.sis.se) were among the first major organisations to endorse the manifesto. We expect others to follow.
4. Identify shared agendas and aspirations of civil society and community groups, including those who may not see health as their main focus, but who share our commitment to a better, healthier, and more sustainable world. This has begun in Sweden with endorsement by Swedish Doctors for the Environment (<http://www.lakareformiljon.org/>).
5. Identify champions within national governments who can promote our planetary health agenda in international policy arenas, including the United Nations and its special organisations and in regional fora.
6. Move towards the establishment of a secretariat and website as the identified coordinating agent and clearing house for matters relating to the manifesto.

The WFPHA could play a major role in ensuring the manifesto and the follow-up actions are discussed and promoted by its member associations and in schools of public health and seems a natural home for a 'planetary health network'.

Box 1: Critical comments received by authors on the manifesto

Critical comments received on the manifesto

‘Apart from the traditional public health responses, we need to consider non-violent direct action commensurate with the scale and urgency of the problem. That is, public health business as usual is not sufficient to make the transition to renewable energy and associated measures required to minimise the risk from greenhouse gas emissions’.

‘I wondered why the paper did not include someone from the global South?’

‘Although I share your sentiments regarding how people are hell bent on destroying this planet, I find that this statement is far too narrow in scope, as it is entirely anthropocentric’. ‘We share this planet with many species. It is our responsibility to protect them, both for their sakes and our own’.

‘I support it in principle although it all sounds rather grandiose’.

‘Thanks seems interesting – in some ways it is how it distinguishes itself from global health and the climate change agenda that the planetary health concept will sustain itself’.

‘I personally support you but it is anti-capitalistic. The world economy is based on ever increasing unsustainable consumption. Can you solve that? I gave up decades ago. I do not think it is possible to have a 10 billion population on earth – all eating something and living somewhere – and not incur permanent ecological destruction. Everyone wants to drive a Mercedes Benz. That is just what people are like. But I admire your energy and optimism’.

‘My only slightly critical comment would be that apart from those who are opportunistic neoliberals, there are also very many who hold those views in good faith. These are the ones we need to argue with (as distinct from polemicise against)’.

‘What is the next step? Is it to suggest some actions that might follow from the manifesto?’

Robert Beaglehole