



# Medical education is all about public health: to what extent is this claim true?

Siavash Moradi\* 

Education Development Center, Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences, Sari, Iran

## Article info

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## Dear Editor,

At the opening of the Association for Medical Education in Europe (AMEE) conference in Vienna on August 26, 2019, Anita Rieder used a phrase that was very interesting to me: "Medical education is all about public health". As this topic was discussed at various AMEE conference symposiums and plenaries this year, I was interested in discussing in detail these concepts of public health and the necessity of their application in medical education.

The most precise and comprehensive definition of "public health" was introduced about a century ago by Winslow as "a science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life, and promoting physical health and efficiency through organized community efforts for the sanitation of the environment, the control of community infections, the education of the individual in principles of personal hygiene, the organization of medical and nursing service for the early diagnosis and preventive treatment of disease, and the development of the social mechanism which will ensure to every individual in the community a standard of living adequate for the maintenance of health".<sup>1</sup>

This still-applicable definition states the impact of all public health work: health promotion and disease prevention using strategies such as environmental sanitation, specific disease control efforts, health education, and medical care. It also clarifies that for those goals to be achieved, organized social action is needed.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, public health is more important than healthcare, according to former surgeon general C. Everett Koop: "Healthcare is vital to all of us some of the time, but public health is vital to all of us all of the time."<sup>3</sup>

According to the American Public Health Association

(APHA), public health includes a wide range of fields, among which the most important are community health, global health, health education and policy, and the social and behavioral health sciences.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, public health can be interpreted as "politically oriented social medicine" according to some references.<sup>5</sup>

From the review of dozens of educational research findings about public health published in the abstract book from the last AMEE conference,<sup>6</sup> we find at least ten essentials of integration of the basics of public health in medical education:

- Ultra-specialization trends of modern medicine
- Social accountability of medical education and its impact on public health indices
- Global health as an emerging field in current medicine
- Duty for public health as a main dimension of medical professionalism
- Eco-health promotion and the one-health approach as a necessity in modern medicine
- Providing education of prevention-seeking behavior in a community-oriented way
- Socialization of the process of teaching and learning
- Internationalization and globalization of medical education
- The impact of familiarity with public health policy on physicians' performance in delivering primary health care
- The burden of chronic diseases and the need for proper management of these.

According to these essentials mentioned above, the lack of will to incorporate public health topics into the medical curriculum will greatly diminish the role of physicians as

\*Corresponding author: Siavash Moradi, Email: [d.smor86@yahoo.com](mailto:d.smor86@yahoo.com)



healthcare leaders and advocacy managers.

In conclusion, given the breadth of the public health field and new educational needs in modern medicine, policymakers' commitment to curriculum enrichment incorporating public health concepts is one of the principal educational emergencies.

**Ethical approval**

Not applicable.

**Competing interests**

None.

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