

A new journal for a new era in public health

The past 3 years have witnessed two Public Health Emergencies of International Concern—epidemics of Zika and Ebola virus. Both have shaken the societies they affected. What are the lessons for public health?

First, robust health information systems are crucial to gather data about the origin and spread of an epidemic. Although the importance of such systems is repeatedly recognised after each crisis, actions rarely follow. To face current and future public health crises, countries need to enhance surveillance and reporting systems, and not only at the time of the outbreak. Technology and health informatics offer new possibilities for effective information gathering. During the past decade, traditional public health surveillance systems have been complemented by syndromic surveillance systems that gather non-specific health indicators as well as proxy measures, such as school absenteeism, Google searches, or Twitter keywords. Internet-based surveillance systems offer new means of monitoring conditions of public health concern, which are logistically and economically appealing.

A second lesson concerns research systems. Again, research might have been too often overlooked by decision makers. Despite the emergence of the Zika virus as a potential public health threat during the past decade, much is still unknown. Gaps in understanding can cause potentially alarmist statements and ill-considered decisions by governments. Ministries of Health from different Latin American countries recommended women to postpone pregnancy for 6 months to 2 years, which seems disconnected from the reality of a region where many pregnancies are still unintended. Research is needed to inform precautionary measures and policies. Public health is commonly defined by three pillars—health protection, health promotion, and health services. But effective public health research is an overlooked fourth pillar of public health.

Surveillance data and research provide information and knowledge, but to be effective and transformative, these insights have to be accessible, and in a timely manner. Only very recently have the barriers to the effective use of information and knowledge been better understood—a third important lesson the health and science community learned during the Zika crisis. The primary purpose of research is to advance public health, prevent diseases, and save lives. Acknowledging that research data and results

are essential in the context of public health emergencies, earlier this year academic journals, together with research funders and institutes, committed to sharing data relevant to the current Zika crisis and future public health emergencies as rapidly and openly as possible.

These lessons underpin the reasons why we are launching a new online open access journal in public health: to prioritise the part research can play in advancing public health and to underline the importance of the open availability of information and research findings for public health decision making. As the recent examples of emerging public health threats amply show, reliable new knowledge can make the difference between life and death, for communities as well as for individuals. Public health issues today are increasingly complex and multisectoral, requiring approaches that combine different disciplines and apply an equity lens to the questions being asked. Cultural differences have to be taken into account too, as do the implications of our new era of sustainable development.

Applying these lessons to all domains of public health, the first issue of the journal provides a selection of strong, topical research which should add reliable evidence to our understanding, inform policy, and ultimately—we hope—advance the health of the public.

Marc Brisson and colleagues use mathematical modelling to predict the effects of HPV vaccination, thereby providing important data for policy makers looking to implement vaccination programmes for girls and boys. The study by Atheendar Venkataramani and colleagues brings new evidence linking economic opportunity and health in the USA. Inequality of opportunity might well be a modifiable determinant of health. Finally, Lisa Burch and colleagues report that for people treated for HIV in the UK, low socioeconomic status is strongly associated with treatment non-adherence and poorer treatment outcomes, suggesting that even in a country with universal health-care coverage, socioeconomic status remains a determinant of health.

The Lancet Public Health will aim to bring you the best research, to stimulate multidisciplinary approaches, to promote new ways of assessing and tackling public health, and maybe even to rejuvenate public health.

■ *The Lancet Public Health*

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