

## **Global Health's Grand Challenge:**

### **Achieving healthy populations and a sustainable planet**

Keith Martin MD, PC

Executive Director, Consortium of Universities for Global Health

In 2009, Jeff Koplan, et al. defined global health as ‘an area for study, research and practice that places a priority on improving health and achieving health equity for all people worldwide’.<sup>1</sup> Since that time the field has matured, as all fields do. We now have a deeper understanding of the threats we face and what we need to do to address them. Of significance, the degradation of our environment and its irreplaceable importance to our well being has thankfully come to the fore.<sup>2</sup>

I would argue that the modern definition of global health is: the study, research and implementation of initiatives that improve the health of people and the planet. This short but powerful definition reflects the overarching, existential challenge of our time: improving the well-being of people while living sustainably on our planet. It is active, challenging us to connect knowledge, research and implementation to address these problems. It is broad enough to embrace the various disciplines within it. And it includes the major threats we face: environmental degradation, climate change, noncommunicable diseases, infectious diseases and the social determinants of health including poor governance.

The World Economic Forum's 2018 Global Risk Report's listed 5 threats that will have the biggest impact on us in the next 10 years. They were: weapons of mass destruction, extreme weather events, natural disasters, failure of climate change mitigation and adaptation, and water crises.<sup>3</sup> Of these, four out of five of the threats have some environmental component. Global health is uniquely positioned to address these and other challenges to our wellbeing due to the broad array of disciplines within it and its foundation of interdisciplinary collaboration.

A few examples.

The Global Health Security Agenda, which involves over 60 nations, is designed to prevent, detect and respond to lethal pathogens. It is actually a public health platform. Expanding it will not only enable nations to address infectious disease outbreaks but also reduce noncommunicable diseases which are responsible for 70% of the world's deaths yet receive little financial or political support. Global health law can strengthen public institutions a vital yet neglected area in development. Veterinarians, ecologists, oceanographers, engineers and public health specialists can work to mainstream conservation and environmental protection into development initiatives. This will help address our sustainability challenges, tackling the degradation of ecosystems services, massive biodiversity losses and climate change while improving people's wellbeing.

With 166 institutional members, the Consortium of Universities for Global Health (CUGH) based in Washington DC is the world's largest consortium of academic institutions and allied organizations involved in global health ([www.cugh.org](http://www.cugh.org)).

The organization works across research, education, service and advocacy to improve the well-being of people and the planet. It has very active committees comprised of its members. This includes a Trainees Advisory Committee of students which is connected to a network of 51 campus representatives. Collaborating with universities, associations, institutions, NGOs, and governments around the world, CUGH strives to strengthen global health programs, share knowledge, strengthen research and training programs to improve the health of people and the environment, particularly in low resource settings. In addition, the organization holds a must attend annual conference. In 2018 it was in NYC. Its theme was Health Disparities: a time for action. Mar 7-10, 2019 it will be in Chicago on Translation and Implementation for Impact in Global Health.

On our tiny blue planet, challenges abound: governance, neglected tropical diseases, protecting human rights, climate change, corruption, capacity building, public health strengthening, the social determinants of health and much. If we want a healthy future, inaction today is not an option. Global health provides pathways to improve the well being of everyone. However, it will take our combined efforts, collaborating across disciplines, while engaging the public and policymakers to win this battle for our planet and ourselves.

## References

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