

Public Health Schools Without Walls: A Report of Network Activities 2001-2002

KR Thankappan, K Mohandas, Carel I Jsselmuiden, Reginald Matchaba- Hove, and Manju Renjit

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Public Health Schools Without Walls (PHSWOW) program was started in the early nineties with an objective of producing post-graduate level public health staff members who are competent as technologists, managers, and leaders capable of directing health systems. The program received leadership and support from the Rockefeller Foundation. Uganda, Ghana, Zimbabwe and Vietnam started off with Master of Public Health programs with the above objectives. Subsequently other schools in Africa and Asia were attracted to the philosophy of this program and a network of similar public health institutions gradually emerged. Annual meeting of this network became a regular activity. The network meeting that was held in Kerala in February 2000 emphasized the need for public health training institutions in the developing countries to take advantage of the scientific and technological advances of the 20th century. For example, information technology was identified as one of the developments that may enhance public health training and practice. Strengthening networks of developing countries institutions, and engaging international institutions were identified as possible ways of improving public health training and practice. Such networks were seen as one of the ways to allow the schools of public health in developing countries to cooperate in sharing resources.

To strengthen the network a working group, comprising representatives from the schools currently participating in the network was formed. The working group consisted of Dr. K R Thankappan, Prof. K Mohandas, Prof. Carel Ijsselmuiden and Dr Reginald Matchaba. It was agreed that while the network would primarily comprise of institutions in the south, a strong affiliation or relationship with those in the north would facilitate resource flow between south and north institutions.

The Achutha Menon Centre for Health Science Studies (AMCHSS) was selected to coordinate the process of defining the future form of the PHSWOW network, and to take responsibility for coordinating the activities of the PHSWOW (in its current form). In carrying out the work, the working group was supposed to document existing resources in the schools. The group was expected to develop questionnaires to use in documenting the resources that have existed in the schools. It was decided to organize two meetings of public health schools; one for the Asia region and another for the Africa region. The Asia meeting was organized in Kerala state of India during February 2-3, 2001 and the Africa meeting in Pretoria South Africa during April 5-6, 2001. Brief reports of both the meetings are included in this report.

In addition to these meetings two members of the working group (Dr K R Thankappan and Prof. K Mohandas) had consultative meetings with a few countries in Asia including Sri Lanka, China, Indonesia and Bangladesh to strengthen the networking of Public Health Schools. These meetings with Health Department Officials and Public Health Schools faculty in various countries facilitated documentation of Public Health Training in these countries. In all the above countries the public health professionals expressed strong interest in networking of public health institutions. The need for faculty exchange between the countries of the south, collaborative research and use of websites for exchange of information was highlighted in the discussions. However due to time constraints and international travel restrictions we were not able to visit some countries that we initially planned to visit.

In the African region it was decided in the Pretoria meeting to form an interim group that will take up the creation of an African network for public health capacity strengthening. The group consisted of Carel Ijsselmuiden South Africa (Chair), Hassen Ghannem, Tunisia (Vice Chair), Ilunga Kabyla, Democratic Republic of Congo, Reginald Matchaba Hove, Zimbabwe, Aderonke Olumide, Nigeria and Fred Wabwire-Mangen, Uganda. The group has developed a questionnaire to collect information on public health capacity in the African Region. The progress of this activity will be presented in the Afri-health meeting in Arusha, Tanzania November 15-17, 2002.

An extensive questionnaire survey was done in India in all the 147 MCI (Medical Council of India) recognized Medical Colleges and some countries in Asia. In addition a few other institutions that offered postgraduate public health education in India were also included in the survey. In addition to the feed back through the questionnaire we used some published materials on some of the important institutions to compile the information. We collected information from the institutions on faculty strength, postgraduate training programs in public health, annual student intake, scientific activities and source of funding. The results of the survey showed that the activities of the public health departments/institutions in India varied substantially. A few of the institutions conducted a number of courses including distance education programs, did publish a lot of research papers, conducted international and national conferences related to public health, and trained many professionals in public health. However around 50 percent of the institutions were not very active in terms of the above activities. We could not collect information on what the trained public health professionals were doing after completion of their training programs. An inventory of public health institutions in India and selected countries in Asia are included in this report. The inventory includes the address of the institution, contact person, and the postgraduate public health training programs offered from the institution.

One of the other objectives of the working group was to start a website for the PHSWOW as a part of the host institute's website. The website (www.amchss.org/phswow) launched as part of the network activities gives detailed information on addresses, contact person and other details of the schools responded in the survey. The website will be updated at least once in a month by the AMCHSS. This will be continued till an alternative arrangement for the PHSWOW network is made. Institutions that provided the information are listed in the website. It is expected that more and more public health institutions will join the network. As and when they provide the necessary information it will be put up in the website. The website will act as a platform for exchange of information between the public health institutions.