

# PUBLIC HEALTH TRAINING NEEDS ASSESSMENT IN BULGARIA: A NECESSARY AND CONTINUOUS PROCESS

S. Popova, A. Kerekovska, N. Feschieva, I. Mircheva

*Department of Social Medicine, Biostatistics and Medical Informatics,  
Prof. P. Stoyanov Varna University of Medicine*

## ABSTRACT

The development of public health education has its solid grounds both in the modern trends of the European health policy and in the national context. It is acknowledged that public health training should adequately meet the demand for professionals to involve in practice and research. The content of the training programmes should correspond to the needs for specific public health knowledge, skills and competencies. This study is aimed at assessing the need for public health professionals in Bulgaria and exploring the specific training needs in terms of necessary knowledge and skills. The methods involved refer to opinion assessment of three target groups: experts, employers, and students at the Master of Public Health programme of Varna University of Medicine by personal (face-to-face) interviews or postal questionnaires. The results show that the need for public health education is widely recognized and it meets the stakeholders' interest in possibilities for public health workforce training and qualification.

**Key words:** public health, public health training, needs assessment, public health professionals, Bulgaria

## INTRODUCTION

The development of public health education has its solid grounds both in the modern trends of the European health policy (4) and in the national context. As Europe moves towards ever-closer integration, the education and training in public health should meet accepted international standards. The prospects are that national agendas on public health education will be based on international integration. That is an effective way to confront and manage the complex health problems challenging the European society (3).

Bulgaria is one of the countries in Europe, taking a leading position with respect to negative indicators of population's health. Public health training is of great importance for dealing with the growing population's health problems and the increasing avoidable mortality, and for the development of a new public health policy. There is a growing recognition of the necessity for a comprehensive approach to improve the health of the population, which involves building of professional capacities from a wide range of professional backgrounds related to public health (2). Public health training should prepare professional practitioners with improved ability to deliver effective public health services (3). Aiming to meet the needs for public health professionalisation in Bulgaria and to conform with the Eu-

ropean standards, too, the Faculty of Public Health, Varna University of Medicine (VUM) has developed a Master of Public Health (MPH) programme within the framework of the international OSI/ASPHER project "Quality Development of Public Health Teaching Programmes in Central and Eastern Europe". The MPH programme is aimed at providing students from a wide range of health related professional backgrounds and relevant work experience with the knowledge and skills in public health sciences in order to be able to define, assess critically and resolve public health problems and make them more effective contributors in their field of health care (1). The availability of adequate and up-to-date information on the changing needs for public health training and professionalisation is a major prerequisite for meeting the MPH programme's objectives. It is acknowledged that public health training should adequately meet the demand for professionals to involve in practice and research. At the same time the content of the training programmes should correspond to the needs for specific knowledge, skills and competencies (1). Therefore, a continuous assessment of the needs for public health professionals and adequate education in public health is essential for assuring the adequacy of the MPH programme's content, its correspondence to the international standards, and also for the sustainability of the programme. For that purpose, a study is undertaken by the Faculty of Public Health (VUM) for estimating the necessary content of modern education in public health, as well as the need for public health professionals in Bulgaria, and at a local level. The aim of this study is to assess the need for public health professionals in Bulgaria and on a regional level and to also

### Address for correspondence:

S. Popova, Dept. of Social Medicine, Biostatistics and Medical Informatics, Prof. P. Stoyanov Varna University of Medicine, 55 Marin Drinov St., BG-9002, Varna, Bulgaria  
e-mail: phealth@vzicompany.bg

explore the specific training needs in terms of necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The public health training needs assessment study involves three stages: before the start of the MPH programme (2001); during the first year of the programme (2001-2002), and a follow-up assessment (2003-2004). Three different target groups were identified and respectively involved in the study:

1. Experts: 23 scientists and senior academic staff working in the field of public health were asked for their opinion on public health training needs;
2. Employers: 72 respondents coming from 16 selected regional centers in Bulgaria<sup>1</sup> were personally interviewed regarding their perceptions on the changing needs for adequate skills and knowledge of those working in the field of public health. This group consists of:

- Directors of Regional Health Centres, Directors of Regional Hygiene and Epidemiology Inspectorates, and Directors of regional hospitals (positions taken by medical doctors with a clinical specialty and a short-term qualification in healthcare management);
- Mayors and Depute Mayors (positions occupied by medical doctors in 6 of the studied regions); Directors of the Municipal Departments of Health and Social Activities (positions taken by MDs in 14 of the regions).

On the basis of their qualification, the group of the "Employers" can also be defined as "Professionals".

3. Students: 23 participants in the first course of the MPH programme were asked about their expectations for the outcome of the training.

The methods involved are directed towards assessing the opinion of the three target groups. Separate "needs assessment" questionnaires were developed for each group. Information is acquired by both personal (face-to-face) interviews and postal questionnaires.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results from the first two stages of the study (before the start and during the first year of the MPH programme) are next presented separately for each of the respondent groups:

### 1. Employers' interviews results:

#### 1.1. Understanding for the essence of public health as a

- 1 Varna, Dobrich, Shoumen, Silistra, Russe, Razgrad, Targoviste, Burgas, Yambol, Sliven, Stara Zagora, Haskovo, Blagoevgrad, Gabrovo, V. Tarnovo, Pleven. Questionnaires were also sent to the rest 12 regional centres in Bulgaria, however, because of the low response rates (25%), these results are not included in the analysis.

field and the profile of the public health professional. The largest part of the interviewed employers had a 'partial' understanding of the content of Public Health as a field and the profile of the public health professional. 'Hospital management' and 'economic issues in health care' were the areas mostly associated with the field. Twenty-seven percent of the respondents showed 'complete understanding' of public health content and the professional profile; 13% had 'vague and unclear' perceptions; and 2% respondents had 'no understanding' of these issues.

#### 1.2. Recognition of the need for public health professionals and training in the field

The need for public health education was recognized by all (72) participants in this group. The interviewed acknowledged the lack in Bulgaria of adequately trained professionals - especially paramedical and non-medical specialists - to be involved in public health practice and research. An overall shortage of public health professionals in health decision-making teams at the regional levels was identified. The employers described their teams as consisting of professionals having clinical specialties with 10% of them possessing diplomas in Social Medicine and Health Care Management and another 15% - certificates for Health Care Management courses (200 hours) attendance.

#### 1.3. Readiness of employers to stimulate staff in obtaining training in public health

The results revealed clearly indicated readiness of employers to stimulate staff in obtaining public health training and qualification. Twenty-five percent of the respondents declared they would financially support the training of their employees.

#### 1.4. Possibilities for professional realisation of the qualified specialists

Possibilities were identified for professional realisation of qualified public health specialists in various institutions such as: the Ministries (of Health; Ecology and Environmental Protection; Labour and Social Affairs) and their regional and local sub-divisions; the National and Regional Health Insurance Funds; health care institutions; academic structures; health programmes and projects; NGOs, social services, etc. The approximate number of needed public health trained professionals was also estimated per type of relevant institution. The highest number of qualified professionals were pointed by the Mayors and Depute Mayors (5-7 employees), followed by the Directors of the Regional Health Centres (3-4) and the Directors of the Regional Hygiene and Epidemiology Inspectorates (2-3). The lowest numbers were proposed by the representatives of the hospital employers. On average, the estimated number of necessary employees to be trained and qualified in public health was 13-15 per region or 208-220 in total for the 16 studied

regions.

#### 1.5. Legal requirements for public health qualification

Legal support was identified as a substantial prerequisite to favour public health training and realisation. Seventy-five percent of the respondents pointed that a Master Degree in Public Health should become a legally imposed requirement for occupying a leadership position in the field.

#### 1.6. Solving the problem of professional shortage in public health field

Seventy-eight percent of the interviewed employers saw the training of available staff in MPH programmes and short courses as a solution of the professionals' shortage problem. Twenty-two percent of respondents were in support of both approaches - re-qualification of available staff and employing new specialists with public health diplomas.

#### 1.7. Current status of public health initiatives

The professionals assessed the current level of public health initiatives as 'low' and 'insufficient' in the following areas: development of preventive programmes and interventions (especially directed to vulnerable groups); assessment of the accessibility, effectiveness and quality of health care services; assessment of population's health; health education and health promotion activities.

### 2. Experts' assessment results

The experts' interviews were focused on the identification of those areas of knowledge and competences that on one hand, are considered very essential and necessary, and on the other, are lacking or insufficient and therefore should be emphasized in public health training. The experts' assessment for the areas of public health knowledge and skills that the practitioners are mostly lacking are the following: behavioural sciences (2,61); health policy assessment (2,61); epidemiology, biostatistics, and information technologies (2,56); population health assessment (2,39). (The assessment is based on a 3-graded scale rising from 1 to 3).

### 3. Students' expectations

With regard to the expectations for knowledge and respective competencies to be acquired in the MPH programme, the following areas were identified by the students (and assessed by a 3-graded scale): epidemiology, biostatistics, and information technologies (2,75); population health assessment (2,75); health policy formulation and assessment (2,70); health education and health promotion (2,70); management of healthcare institutions (2,68).

The third stage of the study - "A follow-up" of public health training needs was carried out in the period October 2003 - January 2004 using the same questionnaires. The respondents target groups involved 15 experts and 36 employers from 6 regional administrative centers in Bulgaria, distributed as follows: 8 from Varna; 6 from Dobrich; 6 from Targoviste; 6 from Shoumen; 6 from Bourgas, and 4 from Sliven.

The continuation of the process of public health training needs assessment has shown positive development. The results from the "follow-up" stage revealed an increased understanding for the essence of the field and the profile of the

public health professional, compared with the earlier stages of the study, as 52,6% of the respondents showed 'complete understanding' of the essence and content of the field. The employers continued to declare a high readiness to support public health training of the staff. The interviewed reported a greater need for public health professionals especially in primary health care institutions and regional health centers. This could be related to the increased popularity and the promotion of the MPH programme, during the first stages of the study, and also to the satisfaction of employers with the first MPH graduates. A higher level of public health initiatives was also promoted especially with respect to preventive programmes, health education and health promotion activities. This is an encouraging tendency. The interviewed municipal representatives paid a special attention to the NGOs as a place for applying the competencies and employing qualified public health specialists. Again the fields of population health assessment; epidemiology, biostatistics and IT; behavioural sciences; human resource management, and health policy development and assessment were determined by the experts as areas with insufficient knowledge and competencies, that should be emphasized in public health training. A necessity was recognized for focusing on the new concepts of public health and their constant promotion at broad audience - civil society, governmental structures, and professionals. A need for development of short-term courses on specific public health topics as a part of the MPH training was also acknowledged. A legislative requirement for a Master Degree in Public Health for occupying leading positions in the field was determined by both experts and employers as an absolute necessity for the future development of public health training and the sustainability of the MPH programmes.

## CONCLUSION

Summing up, the needs assessment study reveals good prospects for moving public health training up on the agenda. The necessity is recognized for adequately trained and competent professionals to work in public health field. A constant shortage of public health professionals in health decision-making team at a regional level is also acknowledged. Readiness of employers to stimulate public health training and qualification of staff is clearly indicated. The qualified public health specialists have good prospects for professional realisation and opportunities for career development.

The conclusion from the needs assessment process also confirmed that the MPH programme in Varna University of Medicine responds to the identified need for professional public health education. It meets the stakeholders' interest in possibilities for public health workforce training and qualification. The needs assessment for public health professionals and the adequacy of the MPH programme should be a constant and continuous process. This will provide us with knowledge of the new aspects of the understanding of public health, and will assure the adequate de-

velopment of the MPH programme and its sustainability in the future.

Public health training has become a main manpower development need for the health care sector in Bulgaria during the last decade and continue to be an important issue during the process of accession to the European Union. Therefore, the MPH programme in Varna is timely in responding to the need of public health professional education.

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