

Human Rights: The Foundation of Public Health Practice

The new century—the new millennium—provides an opportunity to reflect on the profession of public health, on its achievements and the challenges it will face in the future. It is clear that although the profession takes advantage of technology and scientific developments to improve the public's health, leadership in public health, as in any endeavor, is essentially based on values. The values that underlie public health are the values of human rights. Because there is an undeniable relationship between individual rights, human dignity, and the human condition, the teaching of human rights should be integrated into the curriculum of every public health school and program.¹ To base public health practice on a foundation of human rights will not only help public health professionals accomplish their mission, it will unite them across specializations and national boundaries.

Health is a necessary element in improving people's lives, but health alone, dissociated from social, political, and economic developments and social justice, cannot foster human developments or improve the human condition.² A human rights framework is required to place health issues in the arena of public concern and to keep them there.³ Professionals trained to manage the health-development link within the context of human rights will be better equipped and empowered to fulfill the mission of public health—to ensure that people live under conditions in which they can be healthy.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Throughout history, humankind has struggled against oppression, labored to de-

fine the undeniable rights of human beings, and endeavored to choose among competing concepts of family values, sexual morality, and social justice. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, provided the first international articulation of the fundamental rights of human beings and reflected the first agreement among nations as to the 30 inalienable rights.⁴ Article 25 specifically states: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care." This position was echoed in the constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO) and was ratified by subsequent international covenants and conventions.

During the last 50 years, the definition of human rights related to health has been expanded by bodies of the United Nations to include the rights of children, women, and youth; the right to food and environmental security; the right to safe water; and the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, including reproductive and sexual health. In the last decade, the articles of the declaration and a nomenclature of human rights have become crucial on the international scene. For example, the military in various countries must face the human rights implications of using children as soldiers and of planting antipersonnel land mines,⁵ while multinational corporations are forced to address issues related to child labor, working conditions, and business conduct.⁶

The final report of the WHO 5-year task force for health in development calls on WHO and its member states to ensure respect for the right to health, to promote equity, and to address the health consequences of human rights violations.⁷ Further, the report defines

the concept of "health security" in terms of "the rights and conditions that enable individuals to attain and enjoy their full potential for a healthy life." International efforts, by and large, have emphasized governments' obligation to ensure the human right to health. We urge health professionals to take on this same obligation.

As a global society, we must reexamine our approach to the protection and promotion of human life. Traditionally, enforcement of human rights has consisted of decrying abuses of civil and political rights and of taking legal action after they have occurred. Clearly, this is not enough. Social and economic rights must also be upheld, and this is an area in which health professionals can make a difference.⁸ Vigilance to *prevent* human rights violations and to ensure social justice for all people is essential to the advancement of human development and the prevention of human suffering.

Human Rights and Public Health

This social and economic rights discourse is especially pertinent to the field of public health, which focuses on the prevention of disease and disability and takes broad actions to safeguard the well-being of communities and population groups. As public health professionals, every day we address the outcomes of underlying human rights neglect and abuse. If our mission is to "fulfill society's interest in assuring conditions in which people can be healthy,"⁹ we must accept our social responsibility to ensure the rights of all people to health and social justice. Further, as public health professionals, we are in an ideal position to support and ad-

vance human rights tenets and to promote compliance with, prevent the violation of, and decry abuses of human rights.

Today, health professionals who care for patients with HIV/AIDS must put human rights principles into practice on a daily basis: they must protect their patients' privacy, ensure that they have equal access to medical care and insurance, and help them avoid losing their jobs. In addition, these health professionals are dealing with the outcome of society's failure to respect human rights in the past. In the early 1990s, the late Jonathan Mann asserted that "the failure to realize human rights and respect human dignity has now been recognized as a major cause—actually, as the root cause—of vulnerability to the HIV/AIDS epidemic,"^{10(p11)} because of discrimination against people with AIDS. Discriminatory practices against women have increased the vulnerability of entire population groups to the spread of AIDS in many countries, including the United States.¹¹

Human Dignity and Human Health

The relationship between dignity and health (e.g., the effect of abuses of the poor, of prisoners, and of refugees) is gaining new appreciation. In a later publication, Mann called attention to the public health effects of abuses of dignity: "It is increasingly evident that violations of dignity are pervasive events with potential severe and sustained negative effects on physical, mental and social well-being."^{12(p35)} Appreciation of this relationship underlies the tenet that health should not be a commodity,¹³ that health has an intrinsic value.⁷ It is also reflected in the renewal of WHO's health-for-all strategy, which recognizes the enormous inequalities that exist in health status. These inequalities, in the long run, depend on much more than the health sector itself.¹⁴

Taking Action

Along with immense advances, the 20th century has witnessed the exacerbation of inequalities and the colossal losses of human life. Despite the introduction of theories of human rights and dignity, during this century human rights abuses were committed on an unprecedented scale during the 2 world wars, in any number of local wars, through

neglect and victimization of women around the world, and under the heading of ethnic cleansing in Germany, Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia.

The lesson for us, at the century's end, is that when social justice is compromised, human suffering escalates. We must take preventive action in this regard. We must inculcate in our youth respect for human life and dignity. We must foster a social consciousness among decision makers, in both the private and public sectors. We must educate health professionals about the universal principles and values that prescribe social justice and adherence to human rights. We must take a moral position, speaking out against human rights abuses of all kinds and pledging to uphold human rights for all the world's people.

As public health professionals, we can take on the following challenges:

- To adopt human rights as the foundation of public health practice, research, and policy in all countries
- To use the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other human rights documents as the guiding principles for the protection and promotion of the public's health
- To train health professionals to foster human development and health security
- To make policymakers accountable for decisions affecting human health and dignity
- To galvanize society's involvement in the prevention of human suffering and the promotion of social justice

The goal is to improve not only health status but human development, which embraces equity, solidarity, social justice, human rights, and moral and ethical imperatives.¹⁵ The time has come to herald human rights as both the foundation of public health practice and the compass of public policy actions. □

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