

# European Public Health Association

President of EUPHA, **Walter Ricciardi** discusses the organisation's success in providing a forum for policy makers and researchers from diverse sectors to improve health and reduce health inequality in Europe

## What do you see as EUPHA's main aims and objectives?

EUPHA brings together professionals, researchers, trainers and policy makers working in the field of public health from most European countries with the common goal of contributing to improving the health status of all Europeans and reducing health inequalities among them. This general goal is pursued through several sub-goals: to build capacity and knowledge in the field of public health; to create favourable conditions for it to spread and be shared; and to be effectively transferred into practice and policy in all sectors of public health, at all levels and in all countries. At all stages of the process, we have chosen to give priority to a collaborative approach, working in partnership with governmental and nongovernmental organisations and the other institutions in our field that share our objective.

## Why is a multidisciplinary approach to public health so fundamental today?

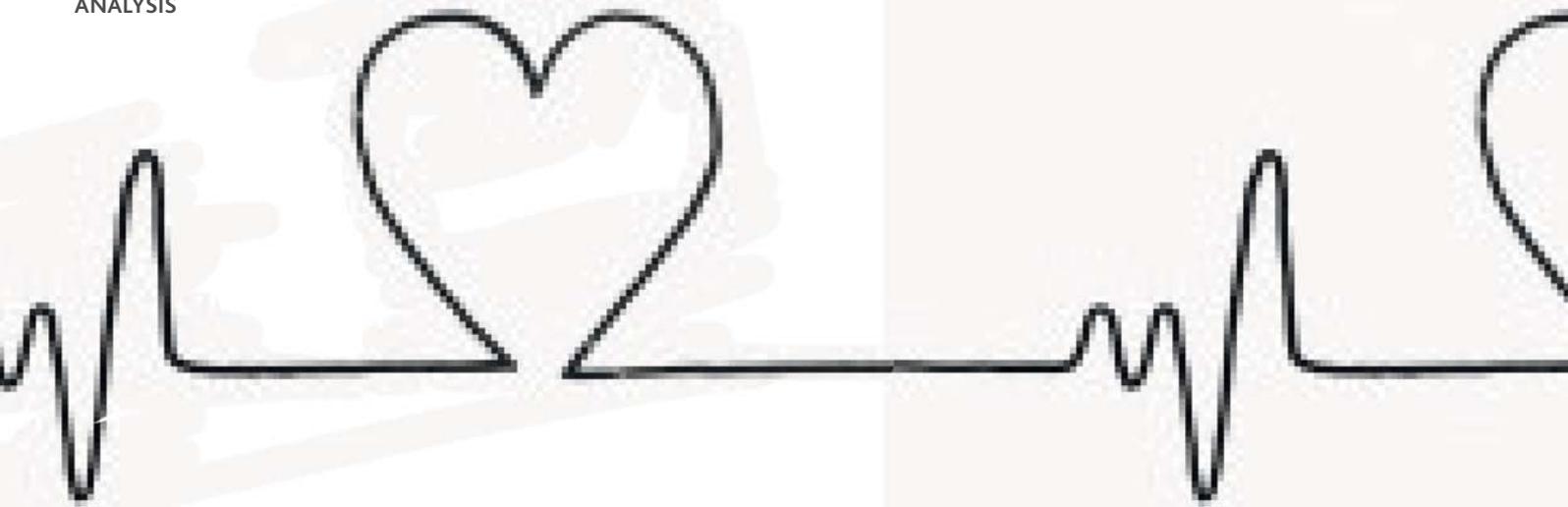
There are at least two reasons. The first is intrinsic to the very nature of public health: improving the health status of a population cannot be achieved by professionals of only one discipline; it requires coordination of skills and expertise from sectors as diverse as medicine, economics, statistics and epidemiology, environmental sciences, social, political and government sciences. This consideration has been integrated into

the Health in All Policies policy strategy approach, officially endorsed by WHO in 1999 and the European Union in 2006. It proposes that the consequences on health of actions in other sectors are taken into account to address health in a more integrated and effective way.

The second reason, which has been getting more and more important over the last decades, is technological progress. We cannot afford to miss the opportunities for public health provided to us by advances in basic biomedical research, physics, chemistry, and in other seemingly distant fields like computer technology, environmental chemistry, economic modelling. This is especially true for Europe, where the economic conditions and the political context allow for investments in healthcare, health promotion and prevention that are unthinkable elsewhere.

## You bring together around 12,000 public health experts from 42 countries. How do you go about attracting members and what services do you provide?

EUPHA represents the largest network for European Public Health and has been expanding steadily since its establishment in 1992. Our annual conferences, which from 2008 are organised jointly with ASPHER (Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region) are the largest European event in the field of Public Health and are recognised



as a crucial appointment for both researchers, professionals and policy makers. Being a EUPHA member means having access to the most up-to-date information on what is happening in public health research, policy and practice at the European level, through a series of tools that include access to the *European Journal of Public Health*, the full version of our website, the monthly newsletter, the EUPHA Reports and the recently activated EUPHApedia, a user-friendly online database of documents encompassing the whole scope of public health, continuously updated and open to contributions by the members themselves.

#### Could you outline some of the strategies you use to promote professional exchange and collaboration throughout Europe?

The most important strategy in this sense is represented by the constitution and the activity of the Sections. A EUPHA Section is a group of professionals from different institutions and countries working in the same sector of Public Health. Belonging to a Section means being facilitated participation in Europe's Public Health community, in particular by having access to information made available by other members and by being helped in both setting up and taking part in large-scale international projects, both in research and practice.

#### By what means are you helping to improve health and reduce health inequalities for all Europeans?

We do this both directly and indirectly. The researchers belonging to our network produce an impressive amount of high quality scientific evidence, which is funnelled into communication channels such as our Annual Conference, the *European Journal of Public Health* and now EUPHApedia. We operate with a constant effort in advocacy so that the strategies we support are actually applied by local institutions, national governments and international organisations with competences related to healthcare all over Europe. Health inequalities, in particular, represent an 'across the board' challenge for healthcare and health that concerns all fields of public health, and we take it as a priority to lay bare the extent to which our society suffers from them, as well as to explain how better health policies (and even policies not strictly or explicitly related to health) could do wonders in reducing them and improving fairness in our everyday life.

#### What approach do you employ in capacity building?

We consider capacity building as a necessary condition for moving from theory to practice in using public health tools and instruments to actually make a difference in terms of health status and wellbeing. EUPHA supports a wide series of activities that are orientated to enhance the skills and knowledge, but also the commitment and the confidence of public health practitioners and professionals. Among these are the sponsorship of training activities, the support of the exchange of information geared to diffuse best practices and the active and direct cooperation with leading international organisations such as the European Union and the WHO. This involves the different levels of

human resources, of organisational structures and processes, and of the legal and institutional framework they operate in – both nationally and internationally.

#### How are you supporting your members to increase the impact of public health in Europe? To what extent are you adding value?

We make it a point to create evidence, help translate it into practice, and make this translation as effective as possible in terms of the final goal of fostering the health status. There is no real advantage in only supporting one of these stages. Adding value can therefore mean: ensuring the highest scientific rigor and severity when producing new evidence; bringing researchers and the results of their investigations into contact with practitioners and policy makers, so that they can usefully orientate each others' priorities and activities; and finally using that information, those strategies or those tools where appropriate, when appropriate and in the appropriate manner.

#### To what degree do you work with governments, as well as influencing policy?

EUPHA works in close contact with the leading international organisations whose activities have relevance to public health. Authoritative representatives of WHO, EU, and OECD are frequent guests at our Annual Conference. Several of our institutional members are charged by local, regional and national authorities to design interventions in specific fields of health-related policies which fall within their remit. But very often we even go beyond that. For instance, EUPHA is preparing a workshop for the Ministerial Conference of the current Presidency of the European Union where we will present our viewpoint and a number of practical proposals on why Health Impact Assessment should be inserted into the agenda of the priorities of EU and on how to integrate it into directives and national legislation.

#### In terms of supporting research, which areas does EUPHA promote? How are you helping public health researchers? How are you making sure research is not wasted?

Research is the first of the four pillars of EUPHA activities (the other three being Policy, Practice and Education & Training). EUPHA was established by scientists, and this original calling is still clearly visible in our firm belief that solid and credible evidence is a condition for all health-related interventions to be effective. Every Public Health Conference is devoted to a specific topic of current interest to ensure that present priorities are addressed – the upcoming conference in Copenhagen will focus on Health, Public Health and Welfare Development.

We facilitate research by supporting young researchers starting their career in public health, by facilitating access to our conference and publications and by new initiatives such as EUPHANxt, a network of young public health researchers. This is also a way of preventing research from being 'wasted' – what we must do is use our discoveries for practical applications. This

is usually difficult, because researchers and policy makers appear to talk different languages: researchers do not know what policy makers need and in what form to present their findings in a way useful for practice, while policy makers do not know where to find, how to interpret and how to use evidence from research. EUPHA represents the ideal meeting point for them: in our Conference, on the pages of the Journal, within the context of the Sections, they can finally relate to each other.

#### What importance do EUPHA place on dissemination?

It is crucial, to the point that virtually every EUPHA initiative is given at least some content of dissemination. We have been developing a series of communication tools that cover the whole range of stakeholders and actors of European public health: from our scientific products, like the *European Journal of Public Health*, which are mainly addressed to researchers, to the personal contacts with policy makers; from the EUPHA Reports for members and practitioners, to new communication tools such as EUPHacts and EUPHAsnapshots that are meant to express EUPHA's viewpoints on current public health issues and raise awareness on priorities to be addressed.

#### In the future do you see the role of EUPHA evolving?

An evolution is ongoing. We mean to go beyond our traditional role as a pure provider of scientific evidence, because we have now gathered the experience and reached the critical mass necessary for that. The topics of our conferences have progressively converged to touch on the current affairs of Europe's public health. Contact with international organisations has become gradually closer. Communication has been improved with a series of tools that are allowing us to express EUPHA's viewpoint on current public health problems. The near future will therefore see EUPHA take on a more active role in shaping all policies with an impact on health by Europe's local, national and international institutions.

#### Would you like to add anything further to this interview?

As EUPHA, we think that it is a priority today that both the general and the technical public realise that all policies, all laws, all behaviours by families and citizens have an impact on health. Health is not just a matter to be solved inside general practices and hospitals. The realisation that we can greatly improve the general wellbeing by looking at the health consequences of all our personal and collective decisions, is a step in the good direction for the future of all Europeans. We will work to raise this awareness, and we are confident we can make it.

[www.eupha.org](http://www.eupha.org)

