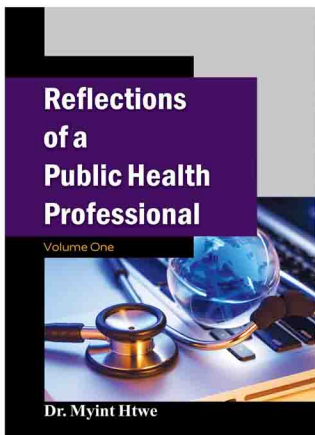


Message to MPH Students



Dr Myint Htwe

13. Message to MPH students

(The article is based on three talks given to MPH students, University of Public Health, Yangon and MPTM students, University of Medicine, Mandalay in 2011, 2014 and 2015 respectively).

You are now entering the field of public health and becoming a member of the public health team. You will notice that public health is an exciting and dynamic subject because it is continuously growing from all perspectives. New and unexpected events are evolving all the time. Later on, you have to deal with these events applying the knowledge and wisdom that you are going to accumulate from this MPH course.

I would say that you have made the right decision to enter this vast field of public health. In fact, MPH is just a basic degree in public health and would serve as a strong foundation or platform on which you can further move forward to any area of specialty that you are interested in. You have several avenues that you can further specialize in, such as epidemiology, occupational health, environmental health, international health or global health, public health nutrition, population dynamics, health care financing, health policy, public health ethics, biostatistics, health system development, tropical public health, etc., after you get your MPH degree. I would like to advise you to try to seriously build up and strengthen your foundation in public health during the course of your study.

You are future leaders in public health in the country. You will be shaping the domain of public health in the country. If you are strong, the domain of public health will be strong. The majority of health professionals in the Ministry of Health are public health professionals.

I would like to put forward one important statement to all of you so that you can always keep it in mind. I am sure that no one can deny this axiom, i.e., *“The key to improving the overall health status of the population in any country*

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is the quality implementation of an optimal mix of cost-effective public health interventions within the framework of the efficient health care delivery system.”

Throughout this MPH course, you will be equipped with necessary technical know-how, public health principles and approaches, epidemiological methods, epidemiological thinking skills, critical or analytical thought processes, deduction skills, and communication skills in the context of the wide spectrum of subjects in the field of public health.

Epidemiological thinking skill is nothing but viewing or analyzing an issue or scenario from different perspectives, angles, planes, and also comparing different scenarios in the context of epidemiologic triad composing of time, place, and person, in addition to, agent, host, environment and vector factors. Epidemiological thinking skills are necessary to solve public health problems, control or contain diseases or conditions or outbreaks in the country. What you are now going to learn and how serious you are in this learning process will determine and influence your career ladder to a considerable extent. In future, you may be working in strategic and higher positions in the Ministry of Health or as a faculty member in Preventive and Social Medicine Departments of Universities of Medicine, University of Community Health, University of Public Health or other public health institutions. At some point in time, you may have several opportunities for working in WHO (Headquarters, Regional Office, Country office), or health-related UN agencies (UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP, Global Fund, GAVI, World Bank, etc.), or bilateral organizations and agencies, or foundations, or INGOs in and outside the country, or as a freelance public health professional. A career as a public health professional is always dynamic, forward-looking and exciting.

The following are some of the basic tenets that you need to follow in your career.

- (i) *Identify a specific technical area of interest in the public health domain in pursuing your career;*
- (ii) *Inculcate epidemiological thinking skill;*

- (iii) Practice a habit of networking and sharing of experience;*
- (iv) Manage and store files systematically in your computer for ease of retrieving them in case of urgent need (otherwise it would be very stressful);*
- (v) Attend local and international seminars, conferences or talks and debates as much as possible;*
- (vi) Seriously improve your English language proficiency (both writing and speaking);*
- (vii) Remove line of demarcation of disciplines or job at workplace (perform to the best of your capacity and capability on whatever your superior asks you to do without reservation);*
- (viii) Inculcate an attitude of fact finding rather than fault finding;*
- (ix) Always have a compromising attitude;*
- (x) Practice the habit of repeated readings;*
- (xi) Be research minded; and*
- (xii) Apply public health principles and principles of public health ethics whenever you make important decisions in your work.*

The spectrum of public health is very wide. Our brain capacity is limited and finite and knowing everything is impossible. However, you must be well versed with the basic principles of public health and epidemiology, social and cultural aspects of any public health issue, various epidemiological methods, issues and challenges in public health in the context of public health ethics. The most reliable, encompassing, enriching, and real-time sources of public health information are available in websites of (i) WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP, UN, WB, (ii) Ministry of Health, and (iii) CDC, NIH, ORI, IOM, and APHA.

I am going to tell you about an information gold mine that you can use for your reference throughout your career in public health. The following documents must be kept handy and you should try to go through them quickly to know their essence. These are:

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- (i) National Health Policy;*
- (ii) National Health Research Policy;*
- (iii) National Health Accounts;*
- (iv) National Health Plans (2011-2016) and strategies;*
- (v) Current organogram of the Ministry of Health;*
- (vi) Annual reports of various public health programmes and key programme evaluation reports of the Ministry of Health.*

When you are preparing a thesis, presentation or case study or doing research or preparing a position paper or concept note, the following sources of information would prove very useful. It is important that you should know the location of the information source, what to read and what to refer to. Otherwise, you will not only face a stressful situation but also, your work output will be incomplete, ambiguous, technically weak and not up-to-date. As you are a public health professional, you must be well acquainted with the *modus operandi* of WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA and their work plans in general. These three UN agencies work very closely with the Ministry of Health. The following documents from WHO are a good source of information:

- (i) World Health Assembly (WHA) background technical documents and resolutions. These are like information gold mines;*
- (ii) SEA Regional Committee background technical documents and resolutions;*
- (iii) WHO Director-General speeches (www.who.int);*
- (iv) Declarations of WHO South-East Asia Health Ministers' meetings;*
- (v) Meeting reports of Scientific Working Groups (SWG) and Technical Advisory Groups (TAG) of WHO on various technical subjects;*
- (vi) SEA regional strategies and global strategies (GS) from WHO HQ in several technical subject areas: e.g., Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity & Health (2004); Global Strategy to Reduce Harmful Use of Alcohol (2010); Global Action Plan for Prevention & Control of NCD:*

2013-2020; Global Strategy for Prevention & Control of Sexually Transmitted Infections: 2006–2015; Global Strategy on Containment of Antimicrobial Resistance; Global Technical Strategy for Malaria: 2016-2030; Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health: 2016-2030; Global Strategy and Action Plan for Ageing and Health; Global Strategy for Containment of Antimicrobial Resistance; Global Strategy for R&D Epidemic Preparedness; etc.(www.who.int & www.searo.who.int)

Another excellent source of information are World Health Reports (WHR), first published in 1995. These are the expert assessment of global health, including statistics relating to all countries, with a focus on a specific subject. It provides countries, donor agencies, international organizations and others with information to help make policy and funding decisions. Some topics covered by WHRs are:

- 1995: *Bridging the Gaps*
- 1996: *Fighting Disease - Fostering Development*
- 1997: *Conquering Suffering - Enriching Humanity*
- 1998: *Life in the 21st century: A vision for All*
- 1999: *Making a Difference*
- 2000: *Health Systems: Improving Performance*
- 2001: *Mental Health: New Understanding, New Hope*
- 2002: *Reducing Risks, Promoting Healthy Life*
- 2003: *Shaping the Future*
- 2004: *Changing History*
- 2005: *Make Every Mother and Child Count*
- 2006: *Working Together for Health*
- 2007: *A Safer Future: Global Public Health Security in the 21st Century*
- 2008: *PHC: Now More Than Ever*

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2010: *Health Systems Financing: The Path to UHC*

2012: *No Health without Research*

2013: *Research for UHC*

In addition, WHO has published reports on specific technical subjects such as: *Preventing Chronic Diseases- A Vital Investment* (2005), *World Malaria Report* (2010), *Public Health- Innovation & Intellectual Property Rights* (2006), *Violence & Health* (2002), *Global Status Report on Alcohol & Health* (2014), *Preventing Suicide: A Global Imperative* (2014), *Global Status Report on Road Safety: Time for Action* (2013), *Road Traffic Injury Prevention* (2014), *Disability* (2011), *World Malaria Report* (2013), *Final Report of World Conference on Social Determinants of Health* (2011), *World Health Statistics* (yearly), and *World Report on Ageing and Health* (2015) Other sources of information are Global Health Observatory (www.who.int/gho/)

Background technical documents of World Health Assembly (WHA) (conducted annually in May in Geneva, Switzerland) are very comprehensive and serve as excellent references. These documents are, in fact, reports by the WHO secretariat. The Health Assembly also adopts a number of resolutions. These documents are a very rich source of information and whenever you have an issue or paper to prepare, please get information from it. Whenever you need to write a strategy or develop interventions on any public health issue, these resolutions can provide you with good ideas.

Similarly, background technical documents and resolutions of the WHO Regional Committee for South East Asia Region (conducted annually in September in one of the countries of the WHO South East Asia Region and also in the Regional Office at the time of election of the WHO Regional Director - every five years) are a valuable source of information in the regional context.

In collaboration with Member countries WHO-SEARO regularly produces regional strategies. These are excellent sources of technical information for you. Some example of regional strategies are: *Regional Strategy on Occupational*

Health and Safety in SEAR Countries (2005); *Ten Point Regional Strategy for Strengthening Health Information Systems*(2006); *Regional Strategy for Tobacco Control* (2012); *Regional Strategy on Universal Health Coverage* (2015); *Regional Strategy on Strengthening Health Workforce Education and Training in South-East Asia Region (2014-2019)* (2015);.

WHO-SEARO regularly conducts South-East Asia Health Ministers meetings, which have resulted in several Declarations in the regional context, viz.

Dhaka Declaration on “*Strengthening Health Workforce in the Countries of SEA Region*” (2006);

Thimphu Declaration on “*International Health Security in SEA Region*” (2007);

New Delhi Declaration on “*Impacts of Climate Change and Health*” (2008);

Kathmandu Declaration on “*Protecting Health Facilities from Disasters*” (2009);

Bangkok Declaration on “*Urbanization and Health*” (2010);

Jaipur Declaration on “*Antimicrobial Resistance*” (2011);

Yogyakarta Declaration on “*Ageing and Health*” (2012);

Delhi Declaration on “*Combating High Blood Pressure*” (2013);

Dhaka Declaration on “*Vector Borne Diseases Today*” (2014);

Dili Declaration on “*Tobacco Control*” (2015).

Whenever you are considering policy and strategic matters, it would be useful to refer to these Declarations. Apart from these, there are several Declarations, Charters and Frameworks at the global level. These are: (healthydocuments.org), *The Declaration of Alma Ata* (1978); *Ottawa Charter of Health Promotion* (1986); *Declaration on Occupational Health for All*; *Jakarta Declaration on Health Promotion into 21st Century* (1997); *Doha Declaration on TRIPS Agreement and Public Health*(2001); *Moscow Declaration on Prison Health as Part of Public Health* (2003); *Commission on Intellectual Property Rights, Innovation and Public Health* (CIPRH) (2003); *Bangkok Charter for Health Promotion in the Globalized World*

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(2005); *Oslo Ministerial Declaration- Global Health: A Pressing Foreign Policy Issue of Our Time* (2006); *The Kampala Declaration and Agenda for Global Action* (2008); *UNGA Resolution 63/33 on Global Health & Foreign Policy* (2009); *Framework Convention on Tobacco Control* (2000); *Ministerial Declaration on Global Public Health* (2009); *Rio Political Declaration on Social Determinants of Health* (2011); *Moscow Declaration on Healthy Lifestyles & NCD Control* (2011); *Beijing Declaration of BRICS Health Ministers' Meeting* (2011); *Nightingale Declaration for a Healthy World*; *Addis Ababa Declaration on Global Health Equity: A Call to Action* (2012).

After this MPH course, you will be assigned to different geographical areas and in different work positions in the Ministry of Health. After some years of service, you will be holding key and senior positions in the Ministry of Health. I want to emphasize that you will be one of the key players in the field of public health in the country and that you will be shaping the country's health system. *Please use your epidemiological thinking skill and principles of public health ethics at that time to make rational decisions.*

My take home messages to you are: “*Read and Read and Read*” and do repeated readings; knowing “*what to read*” and “*where to look for*” are important (our brain capacity is limited); do systematic arrangement of reading materials in your computer; English language proficiency is key to success; develop a compromising attitude; and be non-discriminatory in your area of work.

Last, but not the least, but very crucial is to improve your English language (written and spoken) skill because you will soon be attending international meetings, interacting with many staff from UN agencies, foundations, organizations and international NGOs. If you are not good at English you will not be able to express the subject matter clearly, although your knowledge on that subject is far above other participants. Please keep this point in mind. Fluency in English is also essential for postgraduate studies, either within or outside the country.

Your future is bright; you have ample opportunities or career options waiting for you; your work arena is wide; your work horizon is unlimited; consider seriously but rationally as to what to do; always be down to earth, low profile, sincere, and team-spirited; and always foster positive thinking and an unbiased attitude.

Throughout the MPH course, you will be burning the midnight oil. But the investment you are going to make is worth it. I wish you good luck. Be a quality MPH degree holder to serve the country.

My final message to you is *“Always think aloud first and discuss with your counterparts in making strategic technical decisions in the field of public health”*.

Thank you.

(NB. This is the updated version of the article, which appeared in the Bulletin of Preventive and Social Medicine Society, Volume 1, Number 2, October 2015.)