



2022 IANPHI EUROPE MEETING
Session 3: What Has COVID-19 Taught NPHIs?
May 20, 2022

For two and half years now, national public health institutes (NPHIs) have adapted their activities to each phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moderated by Prof. Geneviève Chêne, chief executive of [Santé publique France](#), this session looked back on this period and aimed at drawing lessons to improve populations' health and allow better national and international cooperation in the future. The first presentation from Prof. Hans Brug, director of the [National Institute for Public Health and the Environment](#), called for a more systematic and collaborative attention to the public health impacts of the pandemic. Prof. Lothar H. Wieler, president of the [Robert Koch Institute](#), introduced the session with lessons learned regarding the communications of public health institutes. Then, Dr. Markku Tervahauta, director of the [National Institute for Health and Welfare](#), presented some recommendations on how to improve preparedness and preparedness assessments. Dr. John Middleton, president of the [Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region](#), insisted on the need for a multidisciplinary approach. Prof. Silvio Brusaferrò, president of the [Istituto Superiore di Sanità](#), concluded with some thoughts on public health and politics. Participants were invited to get involved in the facilitated discussions about the challenges evoked throughout the session. Finally, Dr. Quentin Sandifer and Dr. Jean-Claude Desenclos presented the IANPHI Report on the Lessons Learned from NPHIs' COVID-19 Responses.

Strengthening Information on Health Impacts

Prof. Hans Brug, Director, National Institute for Public Health and the Environment, The Netherlands

Prof. Hans Brug called for a more systematic and collaborative attention to the public health aspects of the pandemic beyond the direct impacts of COVID-19. In fact, the health impacts of COVID-19 can be plotted on at least two dimensions, the direct and indirect health impacts on one hand, and time, present and shorter term, and future impacts, on the other. Both dimensions are crucial to evaluate policy and practice, but most scientific, media and political attention focused and still focuses on direct impacts.

Moreover, most ongoing policy evaluations and inquiries are narrow and center on processes of decision-making and evaluation of crisis, and on governance of crisis, politics and of crisis decision-making. Broad international epidemiological evaluations, which take a direct and indirect perspective on present and future impacts of COVID-19, and which link epidemiological outcomes to policies, measures and decision-making processes, are urgent to learn the lessons for the future.

To monitor health impacts, perform analysis across countries, and better prepare for the future, NPHIs need to compare and evaluate existing data sources and harmonize data, invest in health information

systems that address direct and indirect health impacts, and gain insight in possible future developments and their uncertainties.

Prof. Hans Brug proposed to join forces with the support of IANPHI Europe and colleagues to strengthen this perspective and collaboration with other parties, share information, and align with current international initiatives. This was previously done by OECD, WHO Health Observatory, and Eurostat to create a systematic knowledge synthesis on the broader public health perspective of the COVID-19 crisis.

The Interface Between NPHIs and the Public: To What Extent Can NPHIs Communicate Independently from Governments?

Prof. Lothar H. Wieler, President, Robert Koch Institute, Germany

Communication is at the heart of mitigating processes and crises. The pandemic has been very instructive in terms of communication of public health institutes, and has allowed NPHIs to create some general guidance for future crises.

There are three pillars of communication: political, scientific and media communication. Political communication is often driven by political challenges, and media communication saw scientific journalists become political throughout the crisis. Scientific communication has to reach political and media communication. The message brought through these three pillars should be identical and evidence-based. The right balance between evidence, the legal framework and the implementability of recommendations has to be found.

Scientists and NPHIs should never be pressured by politicians to make false recommendations, and should therefore lean on their strong scientific background. Expectations and responsibilities have to be clarified in order to prevent possible message disruptions such as fake news. Due to limited resources, NPHIs cannot undertake all the communication work properly by themselves, and have to rely on these three pillars to spread an identical message in all different possible challenges.

The Interface Between NPHIs and Knowledge Production, the Link Between Research and Policy Advice, and the Link to Academia and Health Care Services

Dr. Markku Tervahauta, Director, National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), Finland

During the pandemic, THL's work was redirected toward pandemic control. THL provided substantial expert support and played a direct operational role with the government, parliament, regions, municipalities and the civil society.

As observed in many other countries, the Finnish population believes that information communicated during crises is more trustworthy if it comes from healthcare staff, leading health experts and scientists, and less from political leaders and journalists. This can be explained by the multiple elements that were not foreseen such as the emergence of numerous scientific experts, the faster-than-expected global spread, the closing borders and shortages, overwhelming fear, and the poor information available on actual disease severity. The pandemic also formed security threats in multiple ways and has widely affected international relations. The link between public health and politics became clearer than ever.

In order to improve preparedness and preparedness assessments, we need to put an emphasis on rapid detection and verification of threats, improve laboratory capacity, develop global vaccine production capacity, implement real-time data access, and measure trust in government and national authorities and their messaging throughout the process.

The Interface Between NPHIs and Knowledge Production, the Link Between Research and Policy Advice, and the Link to Academia and Health Care Services

Dr. John Middleton, President, Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region, ASPHER

According to ASPHER's surveys, a third of its members were actively involved in policy advice during the pandemic. Not all countries had a national scientific committee, so they had to hastily convene *ad hoc* arrangements. An all-risk strategy needs a standing committee responding quickly to different crises. During the pandemic, ASPHER continued its strategic development, publishing the [WHO-ASPHER Competency Framework for the Public Health Workforce in the European Region](#), the [WHO-ASPHER Professionalization Roadmap](#), completing [training and curriculum for vaccinology and vaccine hesitancy](#) jointly with ECDC, and contributing to the [WHO Roadmap for Building Public Health and Emergency Workforce](#).

The pandemic has shown that we need a multidisciplinary public health workforce and also to pay attention to very specific aspects neglected before. Given the industrialization of troll farms that have been feeding the current conflict in Ukraine and some national general elections for instance, we must educate our young professionals on how to firmly address disinformation and misappropriation of data surveillance capitalism, and to put in place national and international regulations.

Leadership is not a soft skill, but some elements such as how to communicate, persuade, and operate in multidisciplinary and multi-interest contexts and environments can be taught. A new science of geopolitical health is also prescribed to prevent future crises from arising and deal with global existential threats such as crop failure and the lack of antibiotics.

The Interface Between NPHIs and Politics: Can and Should the Two be Separated?

Prof. Silvio Brusaferrò, President, Istituto Superiore di Sanità, Italy

Prof Silvio Brusaferrò explained the difficulties faced by the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS) during the pandemic as being related essentially with communications, social interactions and the ability to convince people to adopt social behaviors to control the spread, infodemic, and decision-making with limited evidence and a lot of uncertainty. He highlighted the importance of mutual respect and recognition between science and politics, transparency about what is known and what is not, robust and timeless data, scientific methods and evidence, and effective and clear communication.

Facilitated Discussion

Prof. Geneviève Chêne, Chief Executive, Santé publique France, France

Prof. Duncan Selbie, President, IANPHI

Dr. Markku Tervahauta, Director, National Institute for Health and Welfare, Finland

Prof. Lothar H. Wieler, President, Robert Koch Institute, Germany

Prof. Hans Brug, Director, National Institute for Public Health and the Environment, The Netherlands

Prof. Silvio Brusaferrero, President, Istituto Superiore di Sanità, Italy

Dr. John Middleton, President, Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region, ASPHER

The facilitated discussion was built around the topics of science and communication, competency development in the workforce, and international cooperation.

Launch of the COVID-19 Lessons Learned Report of IANPHI

Dr. Jean-Claude Desenclos, IANPHI Strategic Adviser

Dr. Quentin Sandifer, IANPHI Strategic Adviser

The 2022 IANPHI Europe Meeting launched the [IANPHI Report on Lessons Learned from NPHIs' Responses to COVID-19](#). Data collection started in September 2020 and several topics were explored, including the roles of NPHIs, their responses, adaptation, independence and transparency of scientific advice, and international cooperation. 33 NPHIs contributed to the case studies illustrating some of the key points raised.

Written by Jessica Borges, IANPHI Secretariat