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Short Communication

The geopolitical architecture of public health: Integrating political literacy and diplomacy into academic and practical training

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Contemporary public health is increasingly shaped by geopolitical forces including populism, widening inequalities, climate and environmental crises, industrialised disinformation, shifting systems of global power, and the influence of state and non-state actors. Yet these determinants remain insufficiently addressed within traditional public health education and training.
Study design: This short communication argues for the integration of Geopolitical Health into public health curricula as a practical and logical response to this changing landscape.
Methods: This communication is a conceptual report which draws on the inclusion of Geopolitical Health within the ASPHER Core Curriculum for Public Health.
Results: The report highlights the importance of political literacy, strategic communication, systems thinking, ethical negotiation, stakeholder engagement, and public health diplomacy. We further propose simulation-based diplomacy laboratories as a means of translating these competencies into practice.
Conclusion: Preparing public health professionals to understand and navigate complex political environments is increasingly essential to protecting evidence, equity, public trust, and population health in an era of geopolitical instability and contested public health narratives.

The field of public health has long recognised the profound impact of social, economic, cultural and environmental factors on health outcomes. However, contemporary global events, ranging from the rise of populist movements and industrialised disinformation to deepening economic inequality and climate and environmental crises, prompt us to broaden our horizons on factors that impact profoundly on health. Increasingly, the health of populations is being shaped, for better or for worse, by interconnected geopolitical forces which have received little attention in traditional public health curricula as central determinants of health.

Based on current literature, the ASPHER Geopolitical Health expert group agreed on the following definition of Geopolitical Health: 'Geopolitical Health is the analytical and ethical framework that examines how power, ideology, and technology influence global health equity, specifically by positioning high-level, interconnected forces as central determinants of health rather than peripheral threats, and equipping public health professionals with the insights to navigate a world where health is increasingly victim to political, economic, and ideological struggles.'

This commentary is a complementary response to the agenda for public health diplomacy in an age of populism proposed by McKee et al.[1] It highlights the inclusion of a Geopolitical Health chapter in the ASPHER Core Curriculum for Public Health (CCP),[2] developed in collaboration with ASPHER-member Schools, Institutes of Public Health and key public health academics, as a timely solution to recognising geopolitics in the academic space. This resonates with thinking and developments in other academic health disciplines such as advances in geopsychiatry, which focusses on the broader geopolitical determinants of mental health.[3]

Specifically, we propose three critical pillars: the role of Schools of Public Health in the creation of public health diplomacy laboratories; the strengthening of public engagement to counter disinformation; and the development of a new curriculum focused on political literacy and negotiation.

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1. The historical and political foundations of health equity

The contemporary political architecture of health is deeply rooted in the post-war order, institutionalised by international agreements such as the UN Charter. However, modern economic systems are being shaped by big technology leaders, fossil fuel interests and transactional tariff-based trade policies. The 'dark' money of oligarchs can buy political influence directly or fund a global web of neoliberal think tanks,[4] working behind the scenes to boost messaging which contradicts public health evidence.[5] Addressing geopolitical influences on health requires confronting embedded legacies of colonialism manifested in Eurocentric academic dominance and skewed research priorities. A rigorous curriculum must advocate for the decolonisation of knowledge, research, and publishing to ensure a truly global perspective, with respect and recognition for the knowledge, experience and rights of local and indigenous populations.

The rationale for integrating the novel area of 'Geopolitical Health' as a core component of the public health curriculum is twofold. Firstly, it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how power, ideology, and technology influence health equity on a global scale. This framework moves beyond the traditional focus on inter-state relations to examine the role of non-state actors, the super-rich and oligarchs, multinational corporations, and new forms of digital influence. Secondly, it equips future professionals with the analytical tools and ethical approaches necessary to respond to these complex challenges. Public health leadership in the 21st century requires the ability to navigate a world where health is increasingly subject to the tides of political and ideological struggles.[6] Populist ideology can be disdainful of science and expert knowledge, and dismissive of professionalism. It can actively promote ideologies which disempower people, and undermine public health messaging about policies which can improve or damage health.[7] Global and national scientific bodies and academic institutions are being defunded and dismantled. All of these require renewed moral courage and reaffirmation of public health ethical values.[8]

2. Strategic public engagement: countering disinformation narratives

As disinformation becomes increasingly industrialised the need to strengthen public engagement to counter this becomes critical for institutional survival. Public health must move beyond top-down messaging to actively monitor digital sentiment and address the underlying anxieties that populist movements can exploit.[1] The ASPHER Geopolitical Health curriculum provides a framework for this by identifying "industrialised disinformation" and "surveillance capitalism" as key instruments of control that must be countered with strategic communication and improving public digital literacy. This approach is essential for addressing the transnational "Sovereign Citizen" movement, which delegitimises government authority and threatens the democratic rule of law. By reclaiming the narrative and framing health as essential infrastructure for a prosperous future, leaders can build the public trust necessary to sustain universal health coverage even in polarised environments.

3. Pedagogy for the next generation: political literacy and negotiation

Academic institutions and training bodies must prepare current and future public health leaders with a specific set of skills that do not stop at technical expertise. The next generation of public health leaders must have an understanding of politics beyond that of their predecessors. This requires that a new curriculum integrates:

1. **Political Literacy:** Understanding the systems and mechanisms of power and the influence of ideological movements on health policy for health improvement or destruction;
2. **Strategic Communication:** The ability to advocate for evidence and equity in environments saturated with disinformation, and to communicate in ways that are digestible to diverse audiences both politically and socially;
3. **Systems Thinking:** Recognising the political interconnectedness of trade, security, and health[9];
4. **Ethical Negotiation:** Developing the capacity to engage with diverse stakeholders while maintaining a commitment to social justice.

The proposed curriculum module is juxtapositioned in the CCP between the curricula on *'Global Public Health'* and *'Public Health in Conflict, War, and Peacebuilding'*. It provides an important conceptual link to both, acknowledging the myriad of ways in which geopolitical factors impact on population health and wellbeing. Geopolitical Health incorporates knowledge, systems thinking, leadership, management, and implementation science to ensure that knowledge is effectively translated into policy and action. These subject areas in the CCP will also reflect elements of geopolitical health to ensure synchronicity.

4. Public health diplomacy laboratories and stakeholder engagement

Public health diplomacy laboratories are designed to combine theoretical frameworks with practical, simulation-based training to build a resilient workforce, aware of the driving forces acting against health, and able to build effective services and interventions to protect and improve health. The proposed curriculum update facilitates this to address Geopolitical Health effectively. It is necessary to build the skills required to work collaboratively with specialists such as ethicists, international lawyers, behavioural scientists and political scientists, amongst other experts. Identifying relevant stakeholders, creating coalitions, and knowing when to centralise or delegate tasks are as vital to the field as academic research.[10]

Leadership in this context is not a solitary endeavour but a collaborative effort. By investing in this curriculum, academic institutions can build a team of leaders ready to defend public health in the face of populism. These professionals should be capable of navigating complex political environments, engaging with non-state actors, and ensuring that public health remains a priority on international political agendas.

5. Conclusion

The integration of Geopolitical Health into the public health curriculum is an essential response to the shifting global order. By combining theoretical frameworks with practical, simulation-based training in diplomacy laboratories, we can prepare a resilient workforce. The goal is to produce leaders who are not only experts in health science but are also skilled diplomats capable of navigating the complex political forces that define the modern era.

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Declaration of competing interest

None declared.

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