Situating research in public health training and practice: current debates and emerging good practice

Christina Zarowsky and Penny Morell

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Workshop Facilitators: Christina Zarowsky, Lucy Alexander, Hazel Bradley

School of Public Health, University of the Western Cape

Background

Research and evidence are integral to public health practice, but the competencies required for effective practice range from practical Monitoring & Evaluation to critical appraisal skills to original research within and across a range of disciplines. The tensions between these needs are particularly evident within Masters in Public Health (MPH) programmes, which seek to develop professional, management and research skills. There is a wide variety of practices and understandings in South African schools of public health regarding how to train for research, and what kind of research. The issue of research within MPH programmes is underexplored: a recent PubMed search for “Research + MPH” found zero references. In follow up to discussions in March 2010 at a UWC Symposium on “Public Health in the Age of HIV”, this workshop sought to explore and share experiences and perspectives with research in MPH programmes in South African Schools of Public Health.

The workshop was informed by the “Public Health in the Age of HIV” Symposium report; an electronic survey of pre-registered participants asking what is needed for public health research capacity in Africa, what research competencies are needed for different career paths, and how MPH programmes are doing; and a mapping and analysis of curricula and approaches to research across MPH programmes. The surveys are being continued together with telephonic interviews now by Naeema Hoosain and Christina Zarowsky, involving all workshop participants, nine heads of department or MPH programme coordinators at South African Schools of Public Health, and the 19 participants in the inaugural meeting of the African Association of Schools of Public Health in Nairobi in October 2010. The workshop attracted 37 participants, covering most South African Schools of Public Health, the Research Directorate at the National Department of Health, the Medical Research Council (MRC), managers and practitioners from several provinces, and participants from universities, industry and NGOs in Malawi, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda, Nigeria, France, and the United States of America.

The objectives of the workshop were to:

• Understand public health schools’ approaches to research training and outputs in the MPH
• Debate whether research training and outputs should be tailored for different career paths, especially practice/management and policy vs research
• Recommend next steps re curriculum and research output criteria within and across Schools of Public Health in South Africa
• Explore how Schools of Public Health schools could contribute to building overall public health research capacity in Africa

The morning was dedicated to presentations and plenary debate, while over lunch and in the afternoon participants broke into working groups addressing public health research capacity in Africa; curriculum and teaching research in MPH Programmes; and research outputs from the MPH, before returning to plenary to present and discuss recommendations.

Five Key Messages:

1. Scope and Mission of the MPH: The MPH must provide grounding in the principles and dimensions of public health as a multidisciplinary and multi-sectoral field to all students, including but not limited to a foundation in research.

2. MPH Outputs 1: Research Competencies and Meta-skills While specific research competencies will vary significantly across career paths and specializations and cannot all be acquired during the MPH, research meta-skills are essential for ALL public health specialists, whether in practice, management, policy, or research. These meta-skills include problem/research question formulation, ability to find and critically appraise existing literature, understanding of scientific and ethical principles of research, and capacity to construct, write and effectively communicate a coherent argument linking the question, literature, aims and objectives to methods, findings, and conclusions.

3. MPH Outputs 2: Research project and minithesis adapted to professional requirements. A mini-thesis is an appropriate output for most MPH students to demonstrate mastery of core research meta-skills, but its structure and focus can be adapted to align more closely with diverse professional requirements and realities. For example, a substantial self-directed project with few interim deadlines is an important rite of passage for students considering a research career, but a more modular approach may be a better preparation for the tight deadlines and limited reflective space characterizing management or policy careers.

4. Implementation: Curriculum, modalities, and mentoring. Curriculum content, teaching modalities and mentoring should be adjusted to decrease the gap between coursework and mini-thesis experienced by most schools and students. Academics who examine theses may benefit from capacity strengthening and peer mentoring in assessing research and mini-theses outside their own disciplinary and professional base.

5. The State of Public Health Research: Public health research remains seriously under-resourced in Africa, including in South Africa, relative both to the public health needs of the continent and to biomedical and clinical research.

For more information or to get involved in strengthening public health research in the MPH and in Africa, contact Christina Zarowsky at czarowsky@uwc.ac.za, www.uwc.ac.za/publichealth

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