

EDITORIAL

Half century of the Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region: A significant contribution to public health education

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Abstract

The Association of Institutions Responsible for Advanced Teaching in Public Health and of Schools of Public Health in Europe was established in 1966. It was in response to the initiative of the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe as part of a worldwide initiative to set up Regional Associations of Schools in every WHO region as a channel for initiating innovative policies. The Organisation's name was later changed into Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER).

ASPHER has established a tradition in terms of an annual award named Andrija Stampar, which has become a prestigious European reward for merits in public health. A significant contribution to public health education has been made during half century and the Association is today stronger than ever before.

Keywords: Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER), public health education, public health teaching.

Establishment and early years

In response to the World Health Organization (WHO) Euro initiative, representatives of the leading Schools of Public Health (or Hygiene) including the Schools for Tropical Medicine (and, in addition, the Institutes of Hygiene/Healthcare) gathered together at meetings held between 1964 and 1966 in Rennes (December 14-18, 1964), Lisbon (February 14-16, 1966) and Ankara (October 17-21, 1966). Already in 1964, Professor S  n  cal from the School of Medicine in Rennes was appointed to draft the Statutes based on the statutes of several international associations and taking into account specificities of the “Old Continent” and suggestions from representatives of the schools. The Statutes were unanimously adopted at the meeting in Ankara on the 20th of October, 1966. The Organisation was first given the French name and acronym (AIRESSPE – *Association des Institutions Responsables d’un Enseignement Sup  rieur en Sant   Publique et des   coles de SP en Europe*) and later (in 1973) the Association’s name was changed into ASPHER (Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region). The history of the Association has been already described (1-3).

The Article 24 of the Statutes stated that its text, written in English, French and Russian (the working languages of the WHO Regional Office for Europe), was to be deposited in the archives of the WHO Regional Office in Copenhagen accompanied with versions in Spanish (also, official and working language of WHO Euro) and German. An Interim Committee was elected with the task of carrying out the decisions of the Ankara Symposium and to convening the first General Assembly of the newly established Association. Prof. Dr. Hans Harmsen from Hamburg was elected as President, Dr. Frans Doeleman from Leiden as Vice-president and Prof. Dr. Jean-Simon Cayla as the Secretary-General of the Interim Committee (4, Preface, pp. 1-3). The Statutes were signed by the President, Vice-President and two Rapporteurs (Professor Jean S  n  cal and Dr Stuart W. Hinds) and it was later approved and published in English, French and Russian in the Bulletin No. 1-2 together with the list of member institutions with full addresses and phone numbers, delegate name and his/her alternate representing the respective member according to the Article 6 of the Statutes (4,5).

The author of this article, currently acting in the capacity of Director of the Andrija Stampar School of Public Health, takes pride from the fact that our institution hosted the first General Assembly of the newly-established organisation, convened in 1968 (Figure 1), on the occasion of which the Statutes were approved and Dr. Jean-Simon Cayla, the Director of the *  cole Nationale de la Sant   Publique* (ENSP; today’s EHESP) established in Rennes, was elected as President; Dr. Christian Lucasse, representing the *Koninklijke Instituut voor de Tropen* (Royal Tropical Institute from Amsterdam) was elected as Vice-President; whereas Dr. Teodor Gjurgjevic, acting in the capacity of the Administrative Secretary of the Andrija Stampar School of Public Health, was elected as Secretary-General. Prior to that, Dr. Gjurgjevic was personal secretary of Andrija Stampar himself. At the time of the First General Assembly, the Director of the School was Professor Branko Kesic, while Prof. Fedor Valic was the third one who contributed significantly to the AIRESSPE’s foundation acting in the capacity of the delegate. It was decided that a seat of the newly established organization would be at the School in Zagreb as long as Dr Gjurgjevic was Secretary-General. The bulletin of the Association was launched and the first two double-issues were published during 1969 (No. 1-2 and No. 3-4) bringing in printed form records of all sessions thanks to the efforts of the Secretary-General who wrote the respective prefaces too (4,5). According to the published lists of the members, the Association counted 33 members at the time of its First General Assembly and it reached 40 members by the end of 1969. Interesting to mention, those 40 members represented the following 16 countries: Algeria [1], Belgium

[5], France [5], Germany [2], Greece [1], Hungary [1], Ireland [1], Italy [4], Portugal [1], The Netherlands [6], Spain [1], Sweden [1], Czechoslovakia [1], Turkey [3], UK [4] and Yugoslavia [3], where number of members is denoted in squared parentheses including one French Institute that already in 1969 announced an intention to withdraw from membership (4,5).

Figure 1. Participants of the first ASPHER General Assembly, convened from October 7-12, 1968, in front of the Andrija Stampar School of Public Health in Zagreb, Croatia



The School of Public Health in Zagreb was established in 1927 by funds of the Rockefeller Foundation and the efforts of Dr. Andrija Stampar as one of the oldest Schools of Public Health in Europe. At the ceremonial opening of the School's building which took place on October 3, 1927, speeches were delivered by the representatives of Rockefeller Foundation (Selskar M. Gunn), the League of Nations (Dr. Ludwig Rajchman and Prof. Léon Bernard), as well as by many others including the representatives of the Institutes of Hygiene from Warsaw, Prague and Budapest. The School became part of the Zagreb University School of Medicine after World War II under the Directorship of Andrija Stampar who also chaired the Department of Hygiene and Social Medicine. At the same time, Stampar was preparing the Constitutions and other documents for the establishment of the World Health Organization, chaired the Interim Commission and was elected by the virtue of acclamation as the President of its First Assembly convened in Geneva. *"He was not only a Founding Father of the latter Organization, but also one of its most stalwart bulwarks during the first and formative decade of its existence"* wrote WHO Director-General Dr. MG Candau in his letter to contribute as a foreword of the publication of selected papers by Andrija Stampar in 1965 (6). The school proudly took Stampar's name after he passed away in 1958.

Dr. Teodor Gjurgjevic (1909-1976) was an interesting person: educated in Law in Zagreb and later in international affairs in Paris and Haag, he was a polyglot fluent in several foreign languages (he used to speak and write in English, French, German and Italian and spoke Polish, Russian and Spanish). He had pursued the path of the career diplomat already before World War II and was a holder of two PhD degrees, one in Law obtained at the University of Zagreb in 1933 and the second in Humanities from the University of Oxford in 1956. He was an employee of the Zagreb School of Public Health since January 1, 1948 till his death on March 20, 1976 with a 3-year break (in 1954-1957) which he used for preparation of the PhD dissertation at the Faculty of Modern History, University of Oxford (7).

Dr. Gjurgjevic had every intention to evoke the interest of SPHs established in the East Europe and encourage them to join the Association; to that goal, he even travelled to Moscow, but was unsuccessful. Moreover, in ASPHER written history it reads: “Dr. Gjurgjevic had a fatal heart attack whilst visiting Libya in the pursuit of his heroic efforts to set up a world federation of schools of public health”, while in official documents it is stated that he died on 20 March 1976 in Zagreb (1,7).

Ever since the Foundation Day, ASPHER has regularly organised its annual conferences. From 2008 on, these annual conferences have been organised in collaboration with the European Public Health Association (EUPHA) and have run under the name European Public Health Conference (EPH). On top of the EPH attendance, the School principals get to meet once more on the occasion of the Deans’ and Directors’ Retreat (D&D Retreat), also organised on an annual basis. Since 2014, when Zagreb had the privilege to host the D&D Retreat, the event has become even more important, given that within its frame the annual session of the General Assembly, earlier convened on the occasion of the annual conference, takes place.

The prestigious Andrija Stampar Medal

ASPHER has made it its tradition to present an accolade (a medal) in memory of Andrija Stampar; the Medal became a reality in 1992 and has been awarded annually since 1993 to the key opinion leaders in recognition of their international-scale achievements in the field of Public Health. The Andrija Stampar Medal has become the most prestigious European award presented in recognition of one’s achievements in Public Health leadership and education. The credit for introducing this accolade and making it a tradition should go to Prof. Jeffrey Levett from Athens, who presided over the Association in the 1992-1993 timeframe, and to his successor, Prof. Ulrich Laaser from Bielefeld, who had acted in the capacity of ASPHER President when it was coined and firstly awarded during the 15th ASPHER Annual Conference held in Bielefeld, Germany, from November 28 to December 2, 1993.

On one side of the Medal, the name of the Association and its logo can be found, while on the edge of its other side the following words, allegedly spoken by Dr. Andrija Stampar, are embossed: “*Public Health Investment Harvests Rich Rewards*”. In the centre of the Medal, the name of the Medallist is engraved (Figure 2). The awardee is selected by the ASPHER Executive Committee, and the award is presented on the occasion of the ceremony organised during the ASPHER Annual Conference. The ceremony includes the laudatio to the awardee delivered by a prominent figure, followed by the “Thank You” speech given by the awardee. The very first awardee was Dr. Léo Kaprio, WHO EURO Regional Director Emeritus at the time (WHO Regional Director 1966-1985), whereas the laudatio speech was delivered by Prof. Jeffrey Levett, the Dean of the Athens School of Public Health (Figure 3). It is worth mentioning that Dr. Kaprio, representing the World Health Organization in his address given at the first General Assembly convened in Zagreb in 1968, stated the following: “*This*

General Assembly of your Association can be an important milestone along the road to further progress in European Public Health” (4, pp 35-39). The list of the Medallists, the pertaining conference venues and the names of the laudatio speakers are available at ASPHER’s website (8).

Figure 2. The Andrija Stampar Medal*



* In order to express her gratitude for the Medal awarded to her in November 2011, Dr Zsuzsanna Jakab, the WHO Regional Director for Europe, gave a Thank You speech in words most carefully selected which was recorded and made available through the WHO website (9); WHO Regional Director also took the opportunity to proudly advertise her Medal Awardee achievement while presenting her annual report during the 62nd session of the WHO Regional Committee convened at Malta on September 10th, 2012 (10, slide 12).

Figure 3. Ceremony of the first Andrija Stampar Medal*



* The very first Stampar Medal Award Ceremony was held during the XV ASPHER Annual Conference held in Bielefeld from November 28 to December 2, 1993. From left to the right: Prof. Ulrich Laaser, ASPHER President, Evelyn de Leeuw, ASPHER Secretary-General, awardee Dr. Léo Kaprio accompanied by Mrs. Kaprio and Prof. Jeffrey Levett, ASPHER immediate Past-President who delivered the laudatio speech (*courtesy of ASPHER*).

Congratulations and best wishes for a productive and prosperous future

Currently, ASPHER has reached 110 members in terms of Schools or Departments of Public Health established in 43 countries of the WHO European Region and, on top of that, some of the Schools from other continents (Australia, Canada, Mexico, Lebanon and Syria) are affiliated with the organization as “associated members” (11).

This year ASPHER is celebrating the 50th anniversary and the schools’ heads will meet end of May 2016 in Athens, where Deans’ and Directors’ Retreat together with the General Assembly is hosted by the National School of Public Health under the aegis of the Hellenic Ministry of Health (12). The fiftieth Anniversary book with member schools’ profiles is already in press (13).

Congratulations! Long live and best wishes for a successful and prosperous next 50 years!

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