

Preface

Anyone watching the television news or reading a newspaper today, in 2014, could be forgiven for lapsing into despair. Europe has yet to emerge from the longest economic recession in over 500 years and its leading political institutions show no sign of even understanding its main cause, their collective failure to tackle the reckless, and in some cases criminal behaviour of the corporate financial institutions. In several parts of the globe, such as Central Africa and the Middle East, conflicts are wreaking carnage among innocent bystanders on a massive scale, often involving unspeakable atrocities, in some cases by states using sophisticated modern weapons to attack densely populated areas. Countries that once aspired to lofty principles of democracy and freedom have been exposed as being engaged in kidnapping (now sanitised by the term “rendition”) and torture. In many places, including parts of Western Europe, anyone who is in any way different, by virtue of their skin colour or the outward signs of their religious belief, risks persecution or worse, with explicitly racist parties achieving significant electoral success for the first time since the 1930s. Politicians, who now including a vanishingly small number of individuals with any scientific training, let alone understanding, are incapable of responding to the profound damage we are doing to our environments, remaining in denial and the evidence of harm accumulates. Media commentators offer not hope for a better future but gloom and doom, representing older people who would once have been valued for their accumulated wisdom as a burden that can no longer be afforded.

Yet, as has so often been the case in the past, times of crisis bring out the best in some people, who have the vision to see into the future, to make the connections, and to propose workable solutions. The challenges listed above have two main things in common. They all have profound implications for population health and they are all what are termed “wicked” problems, characterised by incomplete information and complex interdependencies and thus resistant to easy solutions. They require joined up thinking on a large-scale, drawing on a broad range of disciplinary perspectives, from epidemiology and statistics to sociology and political science. As the editors of this excellent volume note, the skills required are those of a participant in the decathlon. The decathlete may not have the speed off the blocks of Usain Bolt or the endurance of Mo Farah, but they instead have the combination

of talents in a broad range of areas that are required to find possible solutions to these wicked problems.

This book is in many ways a manual for the public health decathlete, although the editors have gone much further by including 15, not 10, items. These items cover many of the contemporary challenges confronting population health. Seven chapters review the changing burden of disease and injury, providing many examples of the tremendous successes of the public health community. The most celebrated have been those in the struggle against communicable disease, with the authors noting achievements in transforming acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) into a condition that those infected die with rather than from. However, there are others, less well-recognised, such as the 50% decline in mortality from cardiovascular disease in North Western Europe in the past four decades. Yet, as the authors of all of these chapters note, progress is not inevitable. Communicable diseases that once seemed to be coming under control are reappearing, such as tuberculosis, but now in a much more alarming drug-resistant form. Indeed, antimicrobial resistance is now recognised as a global threat, potentially posing an existential threat to humanity, just like climate change. Failure by governments to act against the vectors of non-communicable disease, and especially the major corporations that profit from sales of unhealthy products, for example by placing considerations of health above those of trade liberalisation, has permitted the spread of obesogenic and alcogenic environments, with profound consequences for our future health.

Other chapters in this volume explore topics that, while not exactly new, have achieved much greater importance in recent decades. These include the topic on urban health. Even though it has long been known that those who moved to the cities that emerged during the industrial revolution became less healthy than those who stayed in the countryside, the growth of megacities has created health challenges on an entirely different scale. They also include public mental health, long put in a distant second place by public health professionals, echoing the way in which those with mental illness were themselves confined in faraway places, behind high walls where they could be kept out of sight. 150 years on, Gregor Mendel would be astonished at the progress that has been made since his experiments with cross pollination of peas. Genomics brings many opportunities for our understanding of the aetiology of disease and, by enabling improved therapeutic targeting, potentially some advances in treatment. Yet, by creating yet another way to separate groups within the population, it also poses threats to collective actions based on solidarity. It is an issue that is poorly understood by many commentators, as is ageing, also addressed in this volume. The fact that populations are ageing should surely be celebrated as a success, yet too often it is seen as a threat. As the authors note, the challenge is to achieve active ageing, adding life to years and not simply years to life.

As the authors of these individual chapters show, the challenge of understanding and responding to these issues must be based on concerted interdisciplinary activities, drawing together those with a range of skills and expertise. However, the whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts, so two concluding chapters look at the ways of bringing these issues together, highlighting the need to embed health in all policies (including those where it is too often absent, such as fiscal, defence, and

criminal justice policies) and to undertake assessments of the health impacts of all policies. Reflecting on the situation today, had someone assessed, and taken seriously, the health impact of the austerity policies still being pursued in many countries, many of those who found life no longer worth living might still be alive today.

The need for active, engaged, informed, and highly skilled public health professionals is greater now than ever, if we are to raise awareness of the health consequences of the many challenges we now face and are to offer workable solutions. This excellent book, written by some of Europe's leading experts on public health, will help to achieve this goal.

Professor of European Public Health
London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

Martin McKee

A Systematic Review of Key Issues in Public Health

Boccia, S.; Villari, P.; Ricciardi, W. (Eds.)

2015, XIII, 289 p. 39 illus., 25 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-13619-6