Changing agendas and priorities of public health associations across the globe following in the era of COVID-19 pandemic—A mini-review

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has affected the public health associations to a greater extent thus creating both opportunities and challenges for the public health associations across the world. Therefore, it is imperative to review the existing agendas, vision, mission, and objectives of well-known public health associations across the globe and how COVID-19 might change these agendas in the future. We appraised the existing agendas, vision, mission, scope, objectives, and priorities of public health associations and highlighted how these agendas might change over time following this pandemic. Majority of these associations have changed their style of working, they have adapted and modified their strategies, list of priorities, modes, and means of communication, approaches for collaboration, ways of training and educating professionals, and to greater extent associations have also changed their way of researching with special focus on COVID-19. Public health associations have become prime bodies to spread true information to communities and also to take a leadership role in the research, training, and communication. Although public health associations need to revisit their vision, mission, and priorities by developing some strategies, these associations should not deviate from their goals of promoting wellbeing, preventing diseases and disability, and providing equitable health care to the masses mainly during COVID-19 pandemic. These transitions are relevant for primary care physicians as they can be involved in research in an area that is germane to both public health and clinical practice. They can also practice telemedicine and learn new modalities to provide necessary care to the patients.

Keywords: Changing agendas, COVID-19 pandemic, Public health associations

Background

The novel coronavirus has resulted into substantial morbidity and mortality across the globe due to its contagious nature.[1,2] Ever since it was first detected in late November in China, the virus has affected people all over the globe.[3] The only way to curb its swift spread was to impose containment measures by enforcing nationwide lockdowns, social distancing, and travel restrictions.[4] This virus initially originated in one of the provinces of China at the end of 2019, followed by its fast spread across the world,[5] owing to its highly contagious nature, across countries and continents.[6] With China reporting a significant decline in the incidence of COVID-19 following these measures, countries around the world were quick to follow suit.[7] It was around mid of March 2020, when the World Health Organization announced the COVID-19 as a pandemic and enforced countries to take preventive measures.[8] Family medicine and primary care practice with public health discipline are natural allies, they are frontlines disciplines that are expected to work collaboratively in maintaining health and
combating risks as what COVID-19 pandemic brought to the worldwide population. So many public health-type interventions can be initiated in primary health practice, such as health protection, disease and injury prevention, and health promotion. Although family medicine and primary health care scope of practice are more individualistic and toward curative services, but major primary health care practice principles are based on public health discipline perspective, like vaccination, woman health, sanitation, risk factor identification and modification, emergent diseases and new pathogens notification, disease prevention, surveillance, and promotion of health.

With the global economy starting to crumble, unemployment, and poverty on the surge and individuals far and wide being pushed into self-isolation, it was only a matter of days before public health associations across the world started changing their agendas, priorities, and objectives.\(^{[9-12]}\) The impact that COVID-19 may have along with the increased burden virus place on the already overwhelmed public health associations might be a source of worriesome and may bring opportunities and challenges for different public health associations across the world. It is crucial, therefore, to review the existing agendas, vision, mission, and objectives of famous public health associations both in developed and developing countries and how COVID-19 might change these agendas in the future. Thus, the overarching objective of this mini-review is to critically appraise the existing agendas, vision, mission, scope, objectives, and priorities of public health associations from developed and developing countries and to predict how these agendas might change over the time in near future following COVID-19 pandemic.

**Existing Vision, Mission, and Overarching Priorities of Public Health Associations Across the Globe**

Public health Associations are the legal representative and assembly of the discipline of public health, which are scattered at a national, regional, and global levels.\(^{[13]}\) These associations vary slightly in their vision and mission statements, but there is an overlap and commonality in their scope of practice, priorities, and overarching objectives. The public health associations in various developed and developing countries have their predefined vision, mission, and overarching priorities to improve public health. For example, the American Public Health Association (APHA) strives to ameliorate the health of all communities by achieving equity in health status.\(^{[14]}\) Besides, the APHA puts a lot of endeavors to advance prevention, reduce health disparities, and promote wellness. Similarly, the overarching priorities of APHA are to build public health infrastructure, to develop the capacity of public health professionals, ensuring the right to health and health care and health equity.\(^{[13]}\)

Similarly, the European Public Health Association (EUPHA) envisages enhancing the health and welfare of communities by reducing health inequalities for all Europeans.\(^{[15]}\) The EUPHA facilitates a solid voice of the public health network by augmenting prominence of the evidence and by developing the capacity of public health professionals.\(^{[16]}\) Likewise, the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) works to uphold the health and well-being of individuals in Australia. Also, the PHAA is considered as the pre-eminent voice for the public’s health in Australia. Moreover, the PHAA’s mission is to struggle for better health outcomes through improved knowledge, better access and equity, and effective population-based practice in public health.\(^{[17]}\)

The Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) is considered as an independent national voice and trusted advocate for public health. The CPHA tends to raise voice for individuals, populations, and communities at all cadres of government.\(^{[18]}\) The CPHA envisages to increase the well-being of people in Canada and strive for a healthier and more equitable and impartial world. Moreover, the CPHA also influence knowledge, recognize and address evolving public health problems, and unite diverse communities together. The CPHA also promotes the public health perspective and evidence to government stakeholders and policymakers to improve health and well-being for all.\(^{[18]}\)

Low- and middle-income countries also aim to work to improve the health of the populace at mass levels. As an illustration, the public health association in one the largest developing country, India, which is known as the Indian Public Health Association (IPHA) also aims to protect and promote the health of the Indians by enabling the exchange of information, experience, and research and assisting for programs policies, and practices that improve public health. Moreover, the IPHA also strives to improve the environment in India so that all people can attain the best health and can live, grow, and prosper in a clean and safe environment.\(^{[19]}\) Similarly, the mission of the New Mexico Public Health Association is to improve public health practice, policies, and systems that maintain health equity for the population of New Mexico.\(^{[20]}\) This is accomplished by providing a forum for sharing research and practices and serving as a base for leadership development, networking, and action. Last, the public health association in Taiwan also aims to combine the professional forces in public health to promote research quality, share the latest information, strengthen friendships, and encourage communication at the international level.\(^{[21]}\)

Generally, the review of the mission and vision of few countries reveal that overall public health bodies or associations endeavor to maintain and promote the health of their individuals by adapting some country-specific measures. These public health associations serve the community by employing various active channels such as expert panels, consultations, workshops and symposia, training, advancing research, collaboration and networking. Although there might be differences in the approaches or strategies adopted by different countries, their overall goal is to promote the welfare and well-being of the populations and communities and to generate evidence-based policies to promote equitable health and improve access to a healthy environment.
Changing Agendas of Public Health Associations Following COVID-19

The agendas, vision, mission, and overall priorities of a plethora of public health have changed and might change more in the future given the current situation and crisis generated due to COVID-19 across the globe. More specifically, in the current scenario, COVID-19 has affected various public health associations in multiple ways. For example, majority of these associations have changed their style of working, they have adapted and modified their strategies, list of priorities, modes, and means of communication, approaches for collaboration, ways of training and educating professionals, and to greater extent associations have also changed their way of researching with special focus on COVID-19.

Since this COVID-19 is fearmongering for individuals in various societies, it has pushed people to spread rumors out of fear and uncertainty. In this particular situation, it is the prime responsibility of public health associations to respond to the communities and alleviate people's anxieties and myths about COVID-19. This can only be done by raising awareness among people on a large scale to cover the masses. More international focus for the public health associations in this situation is to arrange awareness campaigns on which people can rely on. This is because people cannot rely on unscientific and false rumors rather they look forward to scientific-based knowledge and evidence spread by public health associations across different countries. Although it might be challenging for public health associations to communicate to the larger audience physically because of social and physical distancing, these associations need to adopt different approaches to spreading awareness amongst people. More specifically, public health associations need to change their strategies and follow different approaches to build the capacity of their workforce in disseminating scientific knowledge and important and reliable information regarding COVID-19 to the public. For instance, they might need to move from physical contact to virtual training and webinars to build the capacity of the workforce, which in turn can cover the population within their respective vicinities.

Furthermore, this is the probably accurate and precise time when public health associations need to come forward with active and exhibit their potential leadership roles both in networking and developing active international collaboration with multiple organizations and agencies. This, in turn, will help these associations to not only exchange the scientific information but will also help them to design-focused training to promote the health of individuals and to prevent disabilities associated with COVID-19. Moreover, this might be a turning point in the history of public health associations of the world, where the whole globe is heavily relying on and adapting the preventive public health measures to combat the tiny invisible enemy (COVID-19). Therefore, public health associations need to work intelligently by joining hands with decision and policymakers in promoting key policies and advocacy goals through the media shows, public events, and other means of communication.

Challenges and Opportunities for Public Health Associations Due to COVID-19

On one hand, COVID-19 has stressed the medical community, and physicians and nurses are primarily fighting the battle of COVID-19 at the frontline. However, there is an important role played by public health associations behind the scene. Like medical communities, COVID-19 is both opportunistic and challenging for public health associations. This year of 2020 might be considered a golden era for public health professionals, where they have been given a leadership role on various platforms such as task forces for COVID-19. More specifically, one of the largest and powerful industry, media, is highlighting the role of public health more than ever in the past.

This COVID-19 era has given a lot of attention and attraction to the discipline of public health, and it has been observed that international media dedicates a lot of time to telecast speeches and meetings of public health experts without costing them money. Moreover, social media is also giving unprecedented attention to public health experts, recognizing the public health workforce as frontline charismatic heroes, and cherish the impact of public health mission statements and their scope of work. This is probably the first time in the history where laymen are confronted with public health terminologies and these laymen have been found discussing the projection charts of the epidemiology of how the epidemic will peak and when it's expected to subside in a given country. However, these laymen might not have enough information about these statistics and epidemic curves, they still seem to acknowledge the importance of projections based on the charts generated by public health professionals.

Public health experts have exhibited leadership and scientific role by guiding the countries, states, nations, and regions to take necessary steps such as lockdowns, curfews, and social distancing in an effective manner. This is one of the novice approaches in the history of public health professionals, where they are working closely with primary health care physicians to overcome the challenge of COVID-19. Moreover, public health experts have joined hands with primary health care physicians to provide necessary care to the patients and also help people to follow preventive and control measures. This also helped to take care of other important public health determinants such as combating poverty and maintaining the mental and psychological wellbeing of others. This is one of the examples where public health associations have dynamically exhibited vital roles by collaborating with primary health care physicians. Primary care physicians can also support public health professionals by providing remote and effective care to the patients. Hence, these associations are at the center of light now, as the legal representative body of public health experts across the countries. Furthermore, multiple national governments are fostering and motivating the public health associations to exhibit a more leadership role in helping their countries to build the capacity of their workers in public health advocacy. This has resulted
in multiple opportunities in the form of new training, avenues for more consultation, increased collaboration among experts, empowering high impact public health and epidemiology clinical trials, and more researches in the area of intervention instead of less strong observational studies. In addition, even if we look around the world, the majority of the citizens across the globe have followed typical public health preventive measures of social distancing and practicing hygiene by using water and soap for hands cleaning. Moreover, to an appreciable extent, these laymen recognize and appreciate the public health promotion and awareness messages like the necessity of practicing proper hand hygiene, types and effectiveness of face masks, need of breaking the infectious transmissibility chain and the public health concepts such as social distancing and even more difficult statistical virology and epidemiology terminologies. Moreover, this era of COVID-19 might be considered as a golden era as it has opened the avenues for public health professionals to carry out more research and develop another preventive rather than curative tool (vaccine) to combat this disease both in the present and prevent this from happening in the future. Thus, it seems that there is a visible change in the scope and agendas of the public health.

Lastly, this pandemic seems to bring funding opportunities for public health associations if they can strategically develop and improve their action plans to become more opportunistic in the present time. Although this situation is sad and devastating to humanity, it can prove beneficial in shifting the learning curve for many scientific communities mainly public health professionals. More specifically, public health associations can voice with more power their requirements such as the need of extra funds or research grants allocations and they can also get more recognition in terms of active consultations where they can guide higher authorities where to allocate the existing resources either, for example, in infectious commands controls, national laboratories, and foundation researches in molecular genetics, vaccines industry, and epidemiology contacts tracings technology.

In contrast, this COVID-19 pandemic might bring some challenges and threats along with numerous opportunities as highlighted above. For example, it has been observed that due to panic created by COVID-19 several non-public health experts and practitioners were found to convey false messages to the media and they pretended to be the advocates of the discipline. This resulted in disseminating the false and unreliable nonscientific messages and rumors to the larger population, which might have created more uncertaining and sense of disbelief among people in various communities across both developing and developed nations.

Secondly, these public health associations might face a challenge to maintain public health domain priorities such as ensuring equity to the health service deliveries among minorities and immigrants in their respective areas. Since equity is one of the main goals of all associations, it seems that COVID-19 might distract the associations from achieving this important goal. Moreover, public health associations are also facing challenges in a leadership role while managing resources such as financial, working in unity and harmony with multi-sectors and institutional bodies. More specifically, these associations are facing challenges in liaising with governmental and political bodies. More importantly, these challenges have in turn deviated public health association from working for the mental wellbeing of population and health care psychology in stressful pandemic situations due to COVID-19.

One of the main challenges of public health associations is the fragmentation because public health is a major discipline and umbrella under which many disciplines fall such as epidemiology, environmental health, occupational health, nutrition, and women and child health, etc. Furthermore, there are different associations for each of these subdivisions disciplines in various countries such as Europe, Australia, and the USA. Given this fragmentation, the public health associations need to figure out tangible practical methods of collaborating the work among those pertinent and essential associations, to maximize their expected rules to the served community. Another concern that there might be a challenge of ignoring other disciplines when the majority of the donors and organizations will ignore the existing public health problems such as hunger, other communicable- and noncommunicable diseases like malaria, HIV, obesity and given the transition toward COVID-19, these donors might divert their funds to COVID-19, which might change the priorities and scope of the whole globe in the longer run.

**Conclusion**

To recapitulate, it seems that public health associations are on the pathway to change their agendas, scope, vision, and mission due to the current COVID-19 pandemic. Although this pandemic caused by an invisible enemy has brought a myriad of opportunities for public health professionals, it has also brought a series of challenges for public health associations. Thus it is an overall challenge for public health experts on how to avail these opportunities and simultaneously address these challenges without losing their main scope of the work.

Our review demonstrated that most of the public health associations have changed their approach and ways of working due to COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, they have adapted and modified their modalities, priorities, ways of communication, approaches for collaboration, have adapted new methods of training and educating professionals, and to greater extent associations have also changed their way of researching with special focus on COVID-19. Public health associations have become prime bodies to spread true information to communities and also to take a leadership role in the research, training, and communication. Although public health associations need to revisit their vision, mission, and priorities by developing some strategies, these associations should not deviate from their goals of promoting wellbeing, preventing diseases and disability, and providing equitable health care to the masses mainly during COVID-19 pandemic.
Changing agendas and priorities of public health associations across developing and developed countries is directly relevant to the practice of primary care physicians in multiple ways. First, such transitions would enforce primary care physicians to practice medicine remotely using telemedicine. This will prepare them for online and remote health care services, which might be beneficial for those primary care physicians who cannot practice face to face medicine due to some caveats. Second, primary care physicians will also be involved in the research on an area, which is mainly relevant to public health but also to primary care. Last, due to ongoing pandemic, primary care physicians will modify their lifestyle and will try to provide the necessary and strengthen the preventive and community effective health care in a timely manner without compromising the health of individual patients.

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There are no conflicts of interest.

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