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THE FEDERATION'S PAGES

Editorial: The Global Relevance of the Knowledge in Public Health

Since we were kids, our parents taught us the basic rules of hygiene: brush our teeth, wash our hands before eating and after going to the toilet, avoid drastic temperature changes to prevent colds, etc. We have not forgotten these indications, but when we grew up, other risks became involved: safety in sexual practices, driving carefully without alcohol, avoiding tobacco consumption, having a well-balanced diet, and so on.

Knowledge about how to improve our health is increasing every day, but also daily there continue to be tremendous numbers of deaths from lung cancer, car accidents, HIV-AIDS, malnutrition and obesity, so what is happening? Is there not sufficient information to prevent or avoid all of these illnesses? We do not know yet the causes of cancers, but we certainly do know about factors that facilitate the formation of cancer cells. Prime among these is tobacco consumption. For this specific cause, it was necessary to create the Framework Convention for Tobacco Control (FCTC), to increase information for current and potential smokers about how dangerous it is to smoke. Never is it enough, unfortunately.

There are some persons who believe: "It doesn't matter if I smoke or if I drive my car fast, or if I drink very often... it is simple: there is going to be one reason that will produce my death... I have to die one day!" This is not a good philosophy; it is hedonistic and more common among the younger generations.

For healthier and more productive lives, public health organizations must emphasize the important messages for youth populations. In Costa

Rica for example, we have discovered that our children begin to smoke and become addicted to tobacco at ever younger ages, now 8–9 year olds! How horribly impressive! Should we remain in our comfortable seats doing nothing? The answer is NO. We need aggressive programs to reach all these very young people, yet Costa Rica has not even approved the FCTC.

Communicable diseases like dengue, cholera, or malaria have re-emerged in Costa Rica after having been eliminated many years ago. What happened? Refugees and immigrants brought these diseases back from settings where neither health promotion, nor the social security systems have controlled the environmental factors that permit these diseases to persist.

There are many views about what is the central public health problem. In my view, lack of knowledge and effective communication head the list. The examples I give here are not problems unique to Costa Rica; they exist in the vast majority of developing countries. We need strong and permanent campaigns in many fields including tobacco, drugs and alcohol, auto and road safety, nutrition, exercise, domestic violence, clean environments, global warming, and the protection of water sources.

What are the best strategies to achieve population improvements? We need to target different age groups, varying professional backgrounds, the mass media (including television, bulletins, billboards, internet), public products and health promotion campaigns, and engage popular public persons like those assisting UNICEF around the world (Angelina Jolie, Ricky Martin, and Ronaldinho), or Brigitte Bardot with the animal protection.

Our kids know how to send many messages per hour from their cell phones; and they manage many computer programs with surprising speed. So let us take advantage of these characteristics and focus their minds on how to lead productive and healthy lives. It is the least we can do for the future generations. And we do care about our children, of course!

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