

# ASPHER- ONE HALF CENTURY DEDICATED TO TRAINING IN PUBLIC HEALTH. EVOLUTION, FUTURE PERSPECTIVES AND ATHENS CELEBRATION



**INTERVIEW with  
JEFFREY LEVETT,**

## Jeffrey Levett

Jeffrey Levett is Professor Emeritus, Public Health Management, Hellenic School of Public Health Greece and Professor, International Health, United Nations University for

Peace, Serbia. He spent 20 years in the USA entering on Fellowships from the State Department and the National Institutes of Health followed by professorships in bioengineering and ophthalmology.

He worked at Rush Presbyterian St Luke's Medical Center, Chicago with research in vision, alcohol and nicotine addiction. He acted as a consultant to the Veterans Administration on patient safety and the State of Illinois in emergency medical service development, blood alcohol measurement technology, implied consent legislation. He has coordinated biomedical activities of an Inter-Institutional Cardiovascular Institute and served the USA National Committee for Highway Safety (Drugs and Driving). He returned to Greece to develop magnetic tomography and for biotechnology development. Since 1984, he has been professor in the Hellenic School of Public Health. He is currently developing programs in health disaster management, health diplomacy, reconciliation and human security in the Balkans in the UN University for Peace, Belgrade with collaborative links with Long Island University, Brooklyn with the purpose to strengthen Balkan public health.

**Reporter:** Professor Jeffrey Levett, thank you for accepting to discuss about public health in general and the role of ASPHER in particular.

- Where would you like to start?
- With public health?

**Jeffrey Levett:** Let me start out by saying that public health, is public, as in ASPHER, as in Schools of Public

Health. It is public as in ancient Greece and commensurate with the well rounded life. The Greek word for "private" as in person, gives us the English word for "idiot". Of course, we live in a very different world.

Public health does not sit well in the market place since it has no profit motive; in no way can it compete, except in excellence and interdisciplinary expertise and in education and training of professionals in theory, practice and policy. Public health is vitally important to the organization and management of health services and systems. This is where Schools of Public Health come in. Henrique Barros of Portugal is currently dealing with the essence of their preparedness as a vital component in European development.

The ways of public health are ways to prevent things from going wrong and to ensure that the multiple levels of an effective protective sanitary shield remain intact in normal times and in crisis. Competent professionals must respond to daily chores, unpleasant surprises and to crises.

Health and well-being are among top societal concerns. Disease causes suffering. It places a burden on the healthcare system, which for an efficient and effective response requires a well educated and trained workforce; in other words competent health professionals.

Public health has its focus on population health; its professionals must design smart interventions directed at its improvement, and well interfaced with policy and politics. ASPHER is part of these processes.

**R:** Tell us about ASPHER?

**JL:** ASPHER is an interesting and distinctly different model for collaboration and networking. Its Central Nervous System is the WHO-EURO with a peripheral nervous system or surround of enormous expertise coming from Western Europe. More recently it has acquired a more global reach. It is an organization of member institutions, spread across the European Region.

**R:** .... any comment on the great effort on competence lists developed by ASPHER?

**JL:** While the list of competences has a logical structure, I find there is one significant omission with respect to population health and its determinants namely, its political dimensions. But the work is tremendous.

It is the key independent European organization dedicated to strengthening the role of public health and the improvement of education and training for both practice and research.

ASPHER entered life in 1966 with the first General Assembly in the Andrija Stampar School of Public Health, Zagreb. Its midwife was the Balkan region, Ankara and Zagreb. The forceps for a successful delivery were French. It might have been Bucharest, but the original proposal never came to fruition from Romania.

The first series of meetings and consultations took place in Lisbon, Rennes and Copenhagen. Many distinguished individuals were part of the effort.

ASPHER has survived a number of crises before evolving into the mature and dynamic NGO, which it is today. Today at 50, it is in a celebratory mood but also in an appellant mood. It is ready to dance to different tempos while demanding more investment in our common European future. Its own response will be to place public health competences higher on the agenda as well as to address professional concerns for unfolding environmental dangers and growing population inequality in the broadest sense.

ASPHER's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Book is good reading. It tells quite an exciting story worth knowing.

**R:** *What does ASPHER's Anniversary mean for the National School of Public Health?*

**JL:** The fact that Greece was chosen by ASPHER to host its first half century Anniversary is a significant success for Greece, still unrecognized. It demonstrates ASPHER's confidence in the Athens School one of the earliest Schools in Europe and a founding member of ASPHER.

One outcome from the General Assembly is the *Athens ASPHER Accord* or declaration. Hopefully, it will be translated. Of course you never know when an ACCORD will be read. Hopefully it has some potential to help the School achieve better function and a more beneficial outcome.

Hopefully, it contains elements that will nudge this issue higher up on the political agenda and effect a just noticeable slowing of the runaway train of growing population vulnerability stemming from austerity and the refugee crisis. Public health builds societal resilience.

**R:** *What about Greece, do you see an end to its woes?*

**JL:** Unfortunately, the problem space of Greece is not being tackled well and is unfolding on several long time constants. Several Greek experts from abroad as well as domestic will address specific subjects. It seems clear that the cybernetic principle –use complex ways-tools when facing complex problems, is not used. Most interventions-policies are technically simple, says Elias Mosialis and aim at short term savings... that the opportunities presented by the crisis have not been grasped....that the adverse effects according to Elpidia Pavi have not yet composed themselves into a clear outcome pattern.

I have called this a creeping disaster unfolding on rather long time constants. Nevertheless, infant mortality and suicide are rising and life expectancy is under threat. There are still too many doctors [and many young ones are seeking jobs in better climes]. Technology still lacks the support from biomedical engineering. Medications are life-savers but there is too much in general and sometimes too little where they are needed most. Longer term affronts from austerity will be detrimental to health. The only thing I would add is that Greece will have to deal with a situation where children born today and tomorrow will have a lower life expectancy than children born yesterday and the day before.

**R:** *What else will ASPHER focus on in Athens?*

**JL:** First of all Athens will remind us that rational strategies and their effective implementation require close scrutiny-monitoring, continual review and evaluation. These are a few of the tools to ensure health. Secondly, it will underscore our responsibility to work towards cost-effective and ethical interventions.

Athens will discuss the dynamics of population health and the knowledge and skills necessary to maintain and improve it. What ASPHER is mapping out in this area will be presented. It has already been said that mapping the impact of ASPHER, will shape the direction of Public Health in Europe.

Paraphrasing Anders Foldspang: *it is insufficient to document misery and then hope for some higher power to bail us out.* In the words of Frada Eskin *we need passion and commitment!* A major message from ASPHER is that lists of competences just like people must evolve to reflect changing science and emerging needs. We must distinguish however, between knowledge and skills that help frame a competence and the actual performance demonstrated in practice.

To meet contemporary challenges one way forward is to embrace the five strategic objectives which have been agreed upon by ASPHER in the framework of ASPHER 2020 and set them in motion. They provide guidelines that define direction; they can frame the activities and their content and they can take us into the second half century. Certainly, they touch on improving quality, promoting harmony and in the elaboration of pilot model curricula in new areas such as health diplomacy and health disaster management. It should now include a formal official history of ASPHER. It has to enhance research capacity and erect platforms of research expertise among members, especially its younger members. I can share with you some Breaking News; the European Center for Peace and Development, University for Peace Established by the United Nations, Belgrade is paying special attention to Roma issues and in collaboration with the Luxembourg Institute for European and International Studies (LIEIS). It is also developing interest in Balkan Public Health together with American institutions [Long Island University, Brooklyn, Truman, Missouri.

**R:** *What were your personal insights or special moments?*

**JL:** I can draw from many moments: listening to young people especially three Greeks, one a graduate student of the Athens School as well as rubbing shoulders with them socially; recollections of my days in the Gaza Strip with Yehia Abed and Mofasse Hamdam and an exhilarating horse and cart ride in slanting rain on the Hungarian Pusta with Roza Adany; a memorable kick-off in the awe-inspiring Acropolis Museum where I recalled Melina Mercouri's support for ASPHER's 14<sup>th</sup> GA [1992] and in which I gave my second ever talk this time on Chaos, Mythology and Migration.

Finally, it is always a pleasure to celebrate true achievement. Vesna Bjegovic-Mikanovic [Belgrade] and Martin McKee [London] were given due recognition. They received honorary doctorates from the Hellenic School for their considerable contributions to ASPHER and the Balkan world and to Europe and globally, respectively.

**R:** *What do you think the future holds for the Athens School?*

**JL:** The course of passage of the Athens School has been difficult. Consequently predictions are always risky, so let me give you a personal extrapolation.

The Hellenic School has already written history. It already has an intriguing story to tell. It is a story that reflects the history of Greece. The School has been waylaid by politics and academia; sometimes by its parent ministry. It has suffered the absence of a scientific culture and from the strong presence of party political influences that have intruded on institutional autonomy. It has been stalled by 'tampering' of powerful individuals. It has been short changed by left wing politics, which paradoxically has boycotted it. One knock on effect, cultivated to some degree has been a sense of inferiority to medicine.

On the other hand, it has been aided by more alert politicians on the right and the occasional minister and parliamentarian. Two statesmen and a well known pediatrician should be cited. Eleftherios Venizelos precipitated a short-lived revolution in 1929 and gave us the Hellenic School; in 1974, Constantine Karamanlis having gained public health insights in France effectively raised the School from the ashes of the dictatorship and made its revitalization a priority. Spiros Doxiadis Minister of Health, provided a new legal framework for its renewal and the introduction of new curricula [1981].

Although in 1994, the School was given a major boost it was left dangling in a sustained legal and functional limbo.

Today though only a truly enlightened government with vision can place the Hellenic School where it should be. While the current leadership can speak eloquently of Winslow.

**R:** *... and the future of ASPHER?*

**JL:** ASPHER is on an upward climb! If upward mobility is to continue and make a difference, it needs additional resources.

**R:** *Maybe a closing remark?*

**JL:** Politicians, managers and economists have drummed up scientific support to promote developmental models that lack altruism. Institutional, commercial and political pressures have impacted the professional conscious and can compromise scientific rigor, medical ethics and human rights. Emphasis is on man's non-rational actions, man's egotism; his individual self interest.

These are contributors to a widening gap. The Mediterranean Sea is a daily witness to dreadful waves washing up bodies, after hope has been drowned. War and poverty, death and destruction.

One truly global and universally catalytic intervention for development resides in the renewal and support of public health. A great emphasis must be placed on the health of the public within a global partnership for human security. It should be supported by the United Nations and all its institutions. The soon to be released Athens ASPHER Accord should be sent out in all directions.

Times are bleak, population vulnerability is rising and global inequality is outrageous. The planet is running down. Public health is a vital factor for Europe's socio-economic progress. It requires contributions from all sciences and much more political support. ASPHER with a 50 year long legacy is a great asset to the European health sector.

*Thank you for your kindness to answer to questions.*

*Reporter: Dr. Marius CIUTAN*

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