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Working Group on Environmental Health Services in Europe: Staffing, Professional Education and Training

Report on a WHO Meeting

Dublin, Ireland

2-4 March 1995

1995

EUR/HFA Target 18

TARGET 18

POLICY ON ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH

By the year 2000, all Member States should have developed, and be implementing, policies on the environment and health that ensure ecologically sustainable development, effective prevention and control of environmental health risks and equitable access to healthy environments.

ABSTRACT

A working group meeting was held in Dublin, Ireland from 2-4 March 1995, to discuss and explore the options available for developing the environmental health staffing, professional education and training project. The participants were drawn from Member State governments, academic institutions, and WHO/EURO. The topics considered by the group included staffing profiles for environmental health services, training and curricula needs, and the potential products that could be delivered by this project which would assist in building professional capacities in Member States. A number of key issues, including the role of environmental health services and the dynamic relationship with the professionals employed in these services were discussed. A methodology for proceeding with the project was devised and a suite of tasks to be undertaken were identified. These tasks involve building up a comprehensive picture of the fundamental tasks of environmental health services and from this identifying the specific competences required to fulfil these tasks. Working from this base, further work on the development of appropriate training curricula can be addressed at a further stage within the lifetime of the project.

Keywords

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH – manpower
HEALTH SERVICES – organization and
administration
HEALTH OCCUPATIONS – education
STAFF DEVELOPMENT

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**Working Group Meeting on Environmental Health Services in Europe,
Staffing, Professional Education and Training Project,
Dublin , 2-4 March 1995**

SCOPE AND PURPOSE

Strengthening the ability of the Member States to deal effectively with environmental health hazards by improving capacities of environmental health services at all levels, is one of the priority actions endorsed by the Second European Conference on Environment and Health, Helsinki, 20-22 June 1994. The World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe has already been working closely with Member States to assist them in developing their capacities in environmental health management. Following the Second Consultation on Environmental Health Services meeting in Villnius, 28-30 November, the Member States endorsed a project to address a number of staffing, professional education, and training needs of environmental health services.

In many countries in the region, the institutions of state, and the personnel who staff them, require assistance in improving competence, in terms of knowledge, skills, and ethos (or attitudes) , to successfully tackle the issues that confront them. In many instances, the fragmentation of services, and the hitherto rigid demarcation of responsibilities for particular aspects of environmental health issues has lead to problems being tackled in a piecemeal and uncoordinated manner. The underlying reasons for this situation are manifold. The transition from centralized, ideologically driven, economics to market economies is a complex and sometimes painful process. Many Member States are in the process of radically changing the manner in which they are governed, and in redefining the relationship between the institutions of the state and the rest of society. Furthermore, a commitment towards democratisation and transparency in government throughout the region, has resulted in greater exposure and accountability of government institutions at national, regional, and local levels.

Capacity building of environmental health services at local level is a particular concern. The basic principles of equity and participation endorsed in the European Health for All Targets and the European Charter on Environment and Health, require environmental health services that can address local needs, interface with citizens and groups at local level, and foster active participation by all sections of society in striving towards healthy environments. It is evident that environmental health services are not delivered in a uniform manner throughout the Region, and that in many cases there is not consensus as to what exactly constitutes environmental health services. In some cases, including those Member States where environmental health services have been developed to a high degree, it is now recognised that the range of environmental health problems being confronted are changing, and that the services required to address these must evolve and adapt accordingly. The evolution of environmental health services geared towards dealing with lifestyle and quality of life issues are a major feature in a number of such Member States. It is clear, that all Member States, regardless of the state of development of their environmental health services to date, face a whole range of new problems which they must address.

This project is specifically focused on providing a situational description and analysis of environmental health education and training, and from this baseline, developing "options" documents on staffing profiles and model curricula for environmental health professionals. Other initiatives for the development of professional and student exchange networks and mechanisms are also being instigated, and the identification of centres of excellence in the field of environmental health education is being carried out.

The purpose of the working group meeting in Dublin was to bring together a core working group of workers drawn from WHO/EURO, member state governments, and academic institutions, to explore the range of options available for developing the environmental health staffing, professional education and training project.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION

The working group was asked to consider four main topics over the course of two working days.

- To consider and make recommendations on staffing profiles for environmental health services in the light of the changing situation in the Region.
- To identify deficits in competences, education and training that exist in environmental health services and to make recommendations as how this can be addressed..
- To examine potential training curricula that address the deficiency in competences identified.
- To identify the products which this project can deliver that will assist member states in addressing the problems in staffing, professional education and training of their environmental health services.

The major issues that arose in the course of the meeting were as follows:

- Range of services within the ambit of environmental health.
- Relevancy of the project to public and private sector environmental health services.
- Environmental health service staffing profiles.
- Environmental health professionals and their relationship with service structures.
- Management of environmental health services.
- Relationships between environmental health services and allied institutions and professionals

ISSUES

Range Of Services Within The Ambit Of Environmental Health.

The term "environmental health services" is open to a variety of interpretations, depending on historical, political and economic perspectives. This is compounded by nuances of language and terminology, resulting in a situation whereby quite divergent views on the substantive nature of environmental health services exist. Environmental health services in their broadest sense may be defined as those services which implement environmental health policies through monitoring and control activities. They also carry out that role by promoting the improvement of environmental parameters and by encouraging the use of environmentally friendly technologies and behaviour. They also have a leading role in developing and suggesting new policy areas.

The working group recognised that it was important from the outset to ensure that the project addressed the broadest possible dimension of environmental health services. The working group concluded that a flexible approach must be adopted to the services and professionals targeted by this project. Staffing structures that foster a holistic overview in the delivery of environmental health services should be promoted. The working group agreed that there is a need to carry out a fundamental appraisal of the concepts, tasks, and competences required in the provision of environmental health services. This information would provide a sound base from which guidance on staffing and professional education and training could be developed.

Public and Private Sector Environmental Health Services

It is recognised that environmental health services may be delivered by both the public and the private sector, and that the delivery of these services is not mutually exclusive to either sector. For many member states at this point in time, there is limited benefit in developing strategies for delivery of environmental health services by the private sector as the development of the sector has not yet reached the stage where this is a viable option. The working group concluded that work undertaken by this project should primarily target the delivery of public sector environmental health services. The working group did recognise that environmental health professionals in the private sector could be reached by fostering the education and training of cohorts of graduates from relevant disciplines who share a common ethos. It was also recognised that there are many opportunities for influencing private sector environmental health services, through the development of professional, competent environmental health agencies in the public sector.

Environmental Health Service Staffing Profiles

The work done to date on environmental health services in the European region bears out the fact that they are delivered by a diverse range of professionals working in a variety of service structures. Providing guidance on staffing levels, and on which staff should carry out particular tasks is extremely problematic not only because of this diversity, but also because of the wide range of environmental health issues relevant to individual member states. Prescriptive guidance on these issues may not encourage the development of service structures that reflect the holistic overview required.

The working group recognised the need to provide guidance on the various options available for environmental health service structures. However it was stressed that such guidance should reflect the intersectoral, multi disciplinary approach to providing environmental health services. The working group agreed that an appraisal of environmental health service concepts, tasks, and competences could be utilised by member states in a number of ways. It would assist them in defining the rationale behind the services required, and in identifying the strategies necessary to give effect to these aspirations. It would also assist in determining the specific tasks that their environmental health services must undertake, and identifying the types of competence required to carry out these tasks. From this information, member states would be in a position to assess their needs, in terms of recognising deficiencies in the competence of professionals currently in environmental health agencies, and subsequently to develop strategies for producing professionals with appropriate knowledge and skills.

It was recognised that a number of professional groups may not consider themselves to be operating within "environmental health services", or indeed to be "environmental health professionals", yet may still have a profound effect on the delivery of services. Two examples drawn on were professionals within the transport sector and legal experts involved in drafting legislation.

The working group agreed that environmental health professionals must be imbued with a common foundation of qualities or guiding principles, regardless of job title.

These qualities were identified as being ;

- Publicly accountable,
- A balance of technical and managerial competence commensurate with hierarchical position
- Independent and apolitical,
- Skilled communicator,
- Information manager,
- Ability to participate in research
- Ability to network with allied professionals

The concepts relating to these qualities will require further consideration in the development of the project, and should be reflected in the guidance provided to member states.

Environmental Health Professionals and their relationship to service structures

Decentralisation of decision making in many member states has resulted in responsibility and accountability being filtered down through the system. This aspiration can only be realized if support is provided in the form of education and training that empowers staff to deal with the problems they encounter. Therefore professional education and training must be geared towards problem solving and the development of management skills. The development of environmental health service structures may be compromised if professional staff do not acquire the requisite skills to carry out these new responsibilities. Fundamental choices have to be made by member states as to whether to modify the structure of existing services to accommodate the staff currently in employment or whether to train staff who will effect change in the structure of the services over time.

The working group identified some of the inherent dangers involved in putting new structures in place, without making provision for investing professional staff with the requisite skills to ensure these structures are sustainable. It was stressed that the relationship between the environmental health professionals and the structures within which they function are both complex and dynamic. It was recognised that making superficial structural changes would not assist in addressing the profound challenges faced by environmental health services. However, environmental health staff, (be they newly qualified graduates or currently serving professionals), can only be effective in meeting these challenges if they operate in a working climate that is committed to change, and empowers them to bring it about. Therefore short and medium term strategies might consider the possibilities for re-training and redeployment in tandem with other medium and long term strategies that deal with service restructuring. The working group agreed that special consideration must be given to the training of trainers and the development of continuous professional training programmes within services.

Management of Environmental Health Services

The development of environmental health services in the European region is taking place against a backdrop of profound political and social change. Decentralisation of decision making powers, and a commitment towards democratisation and transparency in government are major priority areas in many Member States. The managers of environmental health services at all levels in the Region, are facilitators in shaping and effecting these changes. This requires committed, highly trained environmental health service personnel, who can interface with both elected policy makers and the public.

The working group explored a range of management options and systems of task distribution that are currently used. A selection of management structure models were also considered. The working group concluded that the hierarchical nature of environmental health service management could be delineated into four main levels namely:

- Data collection - including the gathering of relevant environmental data from sampling, monitoring, surveillance and control programmes;
- Primary data synthesis - including the evaluation of data validity, and reporting on monitoring and surveillance, and control programmes.
- Secondary synthesis and collaboration - including the interpretation of results, instituting intersectoral collaboration with other agencies, public consultation, and implementation of preventative and remedial measures.
- Risk assessment and advisory role - including the integrated management and evaluation of services, and the formulation of advice to policy makers.

The working group concluded that technical staff, with specialist skills were required for the first two levels, whereas those staff at the latter two levels required more general management and problem solving skills which allowed them to have a more holistic overview of the services they control. It was recognised that in reality this approach is not always adopted, and that in many situations staff move up the hierarchy on the basis of their technical skills rather than their management ability. It was agreed that guidance on training programmes that encourage the development of the necessary managerial skills, with reference to the hierarchical model above should be a prime objective of this project.

Relationships between environmental health services with allied institutions and professionals

Environmental health services in many member states call on the services of specialised agencies such as laboratories and research institutes to support their work. This dynamics of this relationship can be problematic. Environmental health services are required to fulfil a research role but striking a balance between the "service" element and research is difficult.

The working group agreed that the emphasis within environmental health services should be on applied research, and that the fostering of generalist-skills managers within services would promote this approach.

It was recognised that many of the issues being tackled by environmental health services had wider social and economic dimensions. It was agreed that there was a need to provide guidance to member states on producing environmental health staff who can network effectively with professionals from other disciplines working in relevant areas.

It was also recognised that many environmental health professionals labour under a bias towards their selected discipline. It was agreed that appropriate training not only enhances the delivery of environmental health services, but also the sense of self-worth amongst environmental health staff, and the respect accorded to them by the society they serve. There is a direct relationship between appropriate training, and the development of fulfilling career tracks (in terms of self fulfilment, professional esteem and remuneration), for environmental health staff.

The relationship between environmental health services and educational and training institutions was considered. The working group agreed that very careful consideration had to be given as to how to embrace these institutions in the project. It was agreed that at present there is insufficient information available regarding these institutions.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- There is a need to "sell" the project to interested parties. The primary method for achieving this is through invoking international protocols that had been adopted by the member states.
- The co-operation of educational and training institutions with the project is vital.
- Close liaison with those parties who provide funding for education and training in the region will have to be fostered as these bodies are central in setting the agenda for training programmes.
- A considerable volume of information on environmental health services in the member states of the region already exists both within WHO/EURO and other sources. It will not be necessary to carry out the extensive country surveys as in previous work.
- Build a comprehensive over view of staffing in environmental health services, by utilising established contacts and sources of information, before embarking on the design of training curricula.
- There is a need for a radical re-assessment of environmental health service management needs, which also takes account of the needs of professionals currently in services.
- There is an need for the project to concentrate in the initial phase on developing a comprehensive picture of the tasks, staffing profiles and level of competence of environmental health services in the Region. Armed with this information it will then be possible to address the education and training needs of member states.
- Further deliberation and consultation on professional education and training needs will be necessary, as the project progresses, and a clearer picture of competence deficiencies are obtained.
- A suite of tasks that the project should undertake were identified.

TASKS

- Produce a list of the fundamental tasks of environmental health services, and from this base line information develop an inventory of requisite competences to fulfil these tasks.
- Conduct a competence assessment of several case study regions in order to gain a broad situational overview of across member states. The case study areas chosen to reflect in as far as is possible the wider scenario in the region.
- Identify the inherent common qualities of environmental health professionals.
- Produce a study of the various courses in environmental health or environmental health related areas available in educational and training institutions throughout the region.
- Organise further consultation with member states on the issue of professional education and training when a more comprehensive understanding of skills deficits has been reached.

ANNEX 1
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