75th Anniversary of Andrija Štampar School of Public Health – What Can We Learn from Our Past for the Future?

"The community presents natural work setting for a physician, not the laboratories or surgeries. The physician is a community worker and a teacher".

Andrija Štampar

The industrialization and development of medical sciences did little good for general health of nations in Europe in the 19th century. The public health facilities and efforts were scarce and poor, although efforts were made in public health organization and improvement in England, France, and Germany. The solution to many public health threats was still a long way from its implementation (1).

It was in the first half of the 20th century that the real struggle for better public health began. During the century, the health and life expectancy of the people improved dramatically, numerous public health campaigns and efforts took place, and the institutions for public health promotion and education, i.e., schools of public health, were founded (1). The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, founded in the United Kingdom in 1899, was the first school of public health in the world (2).

At the beginning of the 20th century, Croatian physician Dr Andrija Štampar (1888-1958), became interested in public health and health promotion (3) (Fig. 1). It was evident that the public health situation in Croatia, as well as in other parts of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, was poor. Croatia, which was at that time predominantly rural country with significant industrialization efforts implemented in big cities, had a poor sanitary and hygiene situation. There were two institutions that dealt in some way with public health issues: the Royal Bacteriological Institute, founded in 1907, and the Royal Institute for the Production of Animal Lymph, founded in 1892. Organized efforts for improvement of public health did not exist and the majority of the population had poor or no knowledge at all of the basic sanitation and hygiene standards (4).

Dr Andrija Štampar was aware of the situation and became interested in solving it. He became very active in public health efforts in the Health Section of the League of Nations and in the Health Section of the Rockefeller Foundation. Later on, he became one of the founders of the World Health Organization and its very active member. In the first half of the 20th century, Rockefeller Foundation had been financing building and organization of many public health institutions both in the USA (e.g., Bloomberg's School of Public Health) and overseas, in Europe and other continents (4).

In 1926, Dr Andrija Štampar and a group of outstanding public health workers founded the School of Public Health and the Institute of Hygiene in the city of Zagreb, the capital of Croatia. Among the people who helped Štampar were Dr Berislav Borčić (1891-1977), physician, veterinarian, bacteriologist, and epidemiologist (Fig. 2); Dr Ante Vuletić (1899-1977), physician and professor of social medicine; and Dr Živko Prebeg (1901-1956), physician and health promoter, especially among school children (5). In 1927, with the help of the Rockefeller Foundation, the complex of two buildings in Zagreb was completed. The "white" building was built for the Institute of Hygiene and the other, "yellow" one, for the School of Public Health (Fig. 3). Those two buildings became the most...
important sites for the organization of public health efforts in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and then the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia). The School of Public Health in Zagreb was officially opened on October 3, 1927. At the beginning, the School and the Institute of Hygiene were a single institution. At that time, the School supervised and, in a way, directed the work of health institutions. As the top element of the public hygienic service, the School was entrusted with the task to study and change the conditions that might have unfavorable impact on people’s health, primarily the health of rural population (6).

The Institute of Hygiene and School of Public Health, which was the full title of the newly formed institution, organized extensive fieldwork to investigate health condition of the population, as well as health campaigns, such as health education, endemic disease control (malaria), and rural sanitation. The Institute also attracted socially oriented physicians, nurses and other profiles of health workers, teachers, veterinarians and other professionals for different forms of continuing education. Specially designed seminars (“Peasants’ University”) for rural population were conducted. The peasants were taught about health and the methods of improving it (Fig. 4). The School also had a rich library, its own publishing service, and a film laboratory, where the first artistic films on health education were made (7-9).

In years to come, the Institute of Hygiene and School of Public Health were again divided into two institutions: Institute of Hygiene and the School of Public Health. In 1947, after World War II, the School of Public Health became an independent institution of the Zagreb University School of Medicine, taking over the teaching of subjects related to preventive medicine to medical students. The School of Public Health slowly transformed from a popular public health promotion institution into a more scientifically-oriented public health teaching facility (10,11).

After the death of Dr Štampar in 1958, the School of Public Health changed its name into Andrija Štampar School of Public Health. An important activity of the School at the time became the organization of postgraduate education for all profiles of professionals in primary health care. The first postgraduate course in family medicine was initiated by Dr Ante Vušetić in 1956, and the first course in school medicine by Dr Živko Prebeg in 1951. These were among the first courses of that type in the world (12-14).

In the 1970s and 1980s, Andrija Štampar School of Public Health became very active in international...
cooperation and educational programs. In collaboration with the World Health Organization and other international agencies, the School organized many international postgraduate courses in different fields of public health, attended by students from 93 countries (15). When Croatia became an independent country in 1991, the School was faced with new challenges. Due to the war that raged in Croatia and the region, the efforts of the School took a new direction. Many of the School’s personnel became actively involved in health care organization in war. Special emphasis was placed on health problems of the refugees and displaced persons, as well as on monitoring of the public health situation in connection with biological and chemical warfare (16,17).

Today, at the beginning of the new millennium, Andrija Štampar School of Public Health is taking on new challenges (Fig. 5). In cooperation with the London School of Economics, the School has recently started a health management postgraduate course. The aim of the course is to educate future experts in the field of health management, to become responsible and educated leaders of different health institutions in Croatia. Furthermore, for the last five years the School, together with the London School of Economics and London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, has organized conferences on health insurance in transition in Dubrovnik. European Observatory on Health Care Systems is a partner for Summer School in Dubrovnik attended by more than six hundred leading experts and policy makers from all over the world.

The School has been also involved in several important projects, making it the main institution for public health education in the Southeast Europe (18,19).

The 20th century was the century of public health issues. Today, when we look back on the past and embrace new challenges in public health, Andrija Štampar School of Public Health stands out as a memento of that period – of the century that brought great achievements in the fields of vaccination and control of infectious diseases, food and water supply safety, improvements in workplace conditions, and family planning, allowing us thus to shift our attention and efforts to major health problems today – heart diseases, stroke, and tobacco use.

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