Sharing hypotheses and ideas in public health research: contributing to the research agenda

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Collaboration and sharing of research resources and ideas in the development of science

Most of us are paid to protect human and animal health, if publishing one more paper becomes more important, we have our priorities messed up.

This was the forceful argument put forward by Ilaria Capua in the debate on how to balance global health against scientists' needs to publish and countries' demands for secrecy.¹ Capua, from the Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale delle Venezie has asked for the release of all sequence data for the H5N1 avian influenza strain into the public domain.

Collaboration and sharing of research resources are key issues in the development of science at all levels. However, any call for the unconditional sharing of data hastens a debate with recurrent economic, political and ideological components. In the public health field, collaboration among researchers, groups or countries needs to be more frequent, as, in theory, all of us accept human health as the first priority in our work and the search for effective social justice as the basis of our discipline.² We are used to the sharing of methods and databases. However, scientists are less used to sharing ideas and hypotheses publicly.

Sharing of research ideas is relevant for public health because this discipline faces several challenges, among which the most relevant might be the need for research results that stimulate the application of public policies to improve health. Although epidemiological research has now focused not only on individual-level but also on population-level determinants, we lack evidence on how to put health on the policy agenda and on how to translate our knowledge on health determinants into effective policies at all government levels. We need research prompted by health problems in a population that provides results relevant and applicable in the same population; as stated by Saracci *et al.*,³ a simple but crucial idea, "from the population to the population" should guide the health-research policy of the European Union. However, research

able to fuel health oriented policies and health advocacy is complex and needs wide-ranging collaboration and efforts often not within the scope of any single research group. Dealing with the complexities of the new global research needs could benefit from the rapid sharing of ideas and hypotheses among researchers. Sharing ideas publicly can promote innovation and creativity among public health researchers. Moreover, when researchers lack the means or resources to develop projects to test their own ideas, then some form of self-censorship might occur. Public disclosure of hypotheses would prevent good ideas from remaining trapped in researchers' minds.

The *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* proposes the exchange of novel ideas for research in public health and epidemiology in its new section "Research Agenda". Discussion of scientific papers usually includes a paragraph on unanswered questions and future research, but our aim is to provide readers with contributions that can serve as a useful background on topical problems in public health research and provide them with a summary of what they need to know, a type of "objectives for future studies". Ideally, authors of the Research Agenda section should share ideas and hypotheses that they themselves are unable to test but which they are willing for some other team to do so.

Voluntary sharing of hypotheses and new research ideas in public health could not only stimulate creativity, innovation and useful research but could also contribute to the shaping of the research agenda. Doyle *et al.*⁴ identified priorities for Cochrane's systematic reviews of public health topics in an effort to promote reviews on the needs of global health policy and research agendas previously not met. This is a welcome initiative to maintain a research agenda that facilitates effective public health interventions and health policies. However, there is a trend towards a

privatisation of science, with an increasing proportion of most frequently cited articles being funded by industry, which puts at risk the social control of the medical research agenda.^{5,6} The promotion of population-centred research—including cheap preventive interventions, policy analysis, health advocacy, etc—needs not only an increase in public funding but also a commitment of the public health community to an effective sharing of any kind of research resources.

The first paper selected for the new section Research Agenda by Kawachi and Subramanian⁷ (*see page 3*) illustrates very well the type of contribution expected.⁷ The authors, renowned researchers in social epidemiology, have chosen a key issue, the relationship between neighbourhood and health. They suggest three main areas that merit urgent research and sound results to clarify the aetiological role of factors related to the neighbourhood level in individual health. In summary, we provide an opportunity to share ideas, hypotheses, needs, strategies and discussion in the challenges we face as public health professionals focusing on the population's health as the main objective.

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