

7th Public Health Conference: Understanding challenges and embracing new developments in South African population health and preventative medicine

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On 17 October 2023, a prestigious event, the 7th Public Health Conference, was hosted at the Gallagher Convention Centre in Midrand, Gauteng in collaboration with the South African (SA) Public Health and Preventive Medicine Association. The conference centred around the theme of population health and preventive medicine. It provided an opportunity for public health advocates from across the country and beyond, to convene and discuss pertinent, relevant topics that are currently impacting the health of our populations.

The conference included four sessions targeting the key areas where public health inputs are essential, including communicable diseases, maternal, women and child health and non-communicable diseases, as well as a panel discussion on subspecialties in public health medicine.

Experts in the field gave riveting, informative talks in each domain. From the communicable diseases section, talks delved into the current disease burden faced by our population, with emphasis on HIV, TB and malaria. The discussions touched on where we are as a global community and as a nation, in respect to the Sustainable Development Goals. Topics went in depth to address the HIV community regarding multimorbidity, specifically obesity and how it relates to our current ARV regimens. HIV was further discussed to look at the immunology of the virus and the future of targeted therapy. The last topic of this session delved into diagnostic tools used for TB, exploring innovations in diagnostic technology and the diagnostic tools currently in the pipeline for the diagnosis of TB in both adults and children.

The second session placed its focus on maternal, women and child health, focusing on current threats to maternal health and potential frameworks for addressing the barriers hindering the achievement of our Sustainable Development Goals. An overlooked yet important topic, infertility, was also discussed at length, focusing on its impact on our communities. From infertility, the discussions shifted to the opposite end of the spectrum, highlighting existing issues and barriers to the safe termination of pregnancy within sub-Saharan Africa. Common barriers faced by women in the context of termination of pregnancies were discussed, as well as the challenges related to safe access to this health service for women.

In the third session of the day, presenters deliberated on non-communicable diseases. Strokes, and management thereof, were presented by an eminent stroke expert from an award-winning stroke centre at a central hospital. The strategies employed by the centre to achieve outstanding outcomes in the acute management of stroke were shared.

Furthermore, the prevention of cerebrovascular accidents was discussed as the most important factor in reducing the prevalence of stroke in all the different levels of healthcare within the SA setting. Preventative strategies at community and primary healthcare levels were highlighted as key areas of focus with continuous education and health promotion still being an essential aspect of prevention. Management options for the resultant complications were discussed, one of which was palliation in stroke. The options discussed focused on the relief of discomfort caused by the stroke, pain and the mental distress of losing partial or full functionality. The goal of palliation in stroke patients focuses on improving the quality of life for the patient, caregivers, support structures and families of the patients. Different models of palliation for these patients in the SA setting were presented, highlighting the advantages and setbacks of each approach.

Given the association between cerebrovascular accidents such as strokes with various non-communicable disease profiles, the growing scourge of multimorbidity was a fitting topic following the discussions on strokes and their management. The prevalence of multimorbidity was defined in both the global and SA context. Multimorbidity was described at a population level, in the context of public health and tapered down to the level of the individual. The different factors contributing to multimorbidity were discussed, particularly the long-term effects in individuals with multiple chronic illnesses with no curative solutions. One of the most noteworthy effects was its cost at a population and individual level. The rise in the prevalence of multimorbidity is paralleled by the rising economic burden, particularly due to its escalating cost of management. The psychosocial impact is an area of concern, with many affected individuals and families incurring costs and adjusting livelihoods to simultaneously manage an array of illnesses. Strategies to strengthen the prevention and management of multimorbidity were suggested at both population and individual levels.

CORRESPONDENCE

During the fourth and final session of the day, topics related to public health medicine sub-specialties were presented. Public Health Medicine is renowned for its broad scope in population and preventive medicine. Consequently, there was a discussion on the formalisation of sub-specialties within this field. A panel of Public Health and Preventive Medicine specialists participated, with members of the panel comprising SA and international experts in various fields within Public Health Medicine. The other category of specialists included independent specialists involved in the consultancy scope of practice. This diverse mix of Public Health Medicine specialists gave a glimpse into the vast areas of expertise within this field, and the importance of discussing the advantages and disadvantages of the 'generalist' scope of practice that is currently being employed in most settings where there are Public Health Medicine specialists. Insights were shared regarding the lack of differentiation within the Public Health Medicine field between formally recognised and registered sub-specialties and special areas of interest or specialised areas of inquiry, such as 'communicable diseases', 'non-communicable diseases' and 'maternal, child and

reproductive health'. The effect on career progression and succession planning when specialised areas are not formally recognised as subspecialties was unpacked by the panel. The audience was offered opportunities to engage with the panel and express their views for or against the formal recognition and registration of sub-specialties. Training and education requirements were also discussed along with the various challenges that may come with designing assessments for these sub-specialties.

Public Health Medicine continues to showcase itself as a growing field of Medicine firmly rooted in evidence-based medicine as illustrated by the strong research arm that makes up the specialty. As much as the field has a clear scope of practice, many areas of healthcare that are not addressed by any other medical speciality are often addressed by Public Health Medicine in every healthcare system or setting. The field continues to grow as evidenced by individuals with decades of experience and expertise. The contribution to improving healthcare is evidenced by the countless areas in which the field of Public Health Medicine adds value and makes a positive impact in every healthcare setting.