TRAINEE SECTION

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Institute of Social Justice and Medicine: Developing a think tank to promote policy formation

Abstract

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as a “resource for everyday living, not the objective of living”; however, worldwide, there remains an unmistakable inequity in level of health and access to healthcare. The WHO has published documents on financing health systems towards universal health coverage [1], promoting healthy life [2], improving performance of health systems [3], and enriching humanity [4], highlighting our shared responsibility towards improving both national and global health and access to healthcare. These documents also recognize that, despite our local and regional priorities, there is a global desire to develop international strategies to improve healthcare.

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The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as a “resource for everyday living, not the objective of living”; however, worldwide, there remains an unmistakable inequity in level of health and access to healthcare. The WHO has published documents on financing health systems towards universal health coverage [1], promoting healthy life [2], improving performance of health systems [3], and enriching humanity [4], highlighting our shared responsibility towards improving both national and global health and access to healthcare. These documents also recognize that, despite our local and regional priorities, there is a global desire to develop international strategies to improve healthcare.

Several disciplines shape healthcare, but we are particularly concerned with the involvement of clinical science in steering international health policy. As investment in health increases, the importance of sound science and equitable policy cannot be overstated. The profound implications of marrying science and social justice need to happen upstream of the development of basic scientists, other healthcare professionals and public policy makers. The current generation of students in the fields of science, healthcare and public policy has distinct challenges, and will eventually be faced with the responsibility of shaping and reshaping policies on international health. In order to enfranchise science and medicine in societal developments, students need to be engaged in policy formation and, at the very least, be cognizant of their future work's ramifications on international health policy. Several think tanks have garnered international influence, yet few have consistently implemented the pillar of science to balance any ideological formula. In this deliberative process, students, at best, feel excluded from the process of shaping health policies, or at worst, disengaged and ill prepared to tackle the challenges they will confront in their professional lives. The majority of medical students worldwide learn predominantly details of physiology, pathology and disease management. Although public health, global health and health policy are being introduced as part of the mandatory curriculum, the literature reveals that such programs exist only at a fraction of undergraduate medical institutions and/or are in their infancy and need substantive development [5-11], with fewer initiatives at programs in other health professionals [12,13]. Furthermore, healthcare is evolving towards an interprofessional model of healthcare delivery, a perspective that is not fully integrated in current efforts, but is compulsory in any meaningful effort to shape equitable health policies.

Worldwide, student organizations and advocacy groups have developed community programs, debated on controversial health topics and advocated for the health of marginalized populations. These organizations are primarily based at educa-

tional institutions, and tend to focus on students in professional programs; for example, in medicine, or on the needs of local/regional communities. There is a perceived paucity of leadership from science and medicine in policy debate, and the onus of responsible contribution is something students cannot shy away from [14]. We propose the development of a virtual student-based Institute of Social Justice and Medicine as a practical and philosophical offspring of Canada's ivory tower and student grass roots.

What will be the role of such a student-based think tank? The institute will address the relative absence of science in policy formation, foster academic collaboration worldwide and allow new distinctive challenges to be framed in a global context. The Institute aims to be a pre-eminent think tank that will provide a forum for substantive interdisciplinary dialogue between students. The Institute will operate on a voluntary basis, without partisan influences that may alter the objectivity of its conclusions and recommendations. This will allow students worldwide to ask challenging questions, engage in debate, and draw conclusions using an evidence-based approach rooted in scientific principle. Whereas present regional and national student organizations have an extensive student mandate, the Institute will be distinct in its focus on employing research to address complex topics of national and global relevance. While the Institute will tackle problems of Canadian relevance, the Institute will be cognizant that public/local health cannot meaningfully be disentangled from global health. With this perspective, the Institute will also address international problems that directly or indirectly affect Canadians and Canadian health. With a virtual platform for intellectual discourse and the collaborative production of white papers, the Institute will seek to build on the scientific basis of clinical science and medicine, promote civic professionalism and transcend the traditional limitations of student government politics. Other organizations focus on online publications on controversial topics (Public Health and Social Justice [15]) or on developing services, programs, and lobbying for increased healthcare access for marginalized communities (Partners in Health [16]). Unique to our Institute will be a National Council, with representation from all Canadian universities, to promote peer-based learning and garner legitimacy as a national student voice. The Institute's focus on investigative research and policy will be guided by a Distinguished Advisory Board, which will consist of leaders in the field of medical education and leadership, advocacy, and healthcare policy. Topics proposed will be researched by members of the National Council or by students interested in pursuing research. This will allow for additional students to be engaged in policy research. The Institute of So-

cial Justice and Medicine is a novel idea that envisions bringing together the progressive minds to shape policies that will impact the health of our communities.

The current generation of students is fortunate to witness the unprecedented economic advances of globalization; however, the world recession has brought its own set of crucibles for global health leadership. The role of public health in international relations has reached an elevated political priority, and the immediate implications of economic austerity have grave healthcare outcomes in the developing world [17]. There is a significant opportunity for science in international health policy as the dynamics of accountability are ever evolving [15, 16,18,19], and The Institute is committed to this newly assumed role. While acknowledging the need for sound science, the philosophical underpinning of the Institute would involve social justice and civic engagement. As ideologies and vested interests may look to exploit a beleaguered world stage, The Institute would call for a more progressive global citizenship. As science and justice look to lead health advancement, Foucault's primary obligation of medicine resonates more than ever, "*The first task of the physician is political, the struggle against disease must begin with a war against bad policy. Man will be totally and definitely cured only if he is first liberated*" [20].

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