



ASPHER statement marking two years of the COVID-19 pandemic

11 March 2022 marks two years since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 Pandemic¹ after having recognised it as a public health emergency of international concern on 30 January.²

In our statement on the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak emergency, the Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER) outlined the unique knowledge and competencies found within Schools of Public Health to respond to the pandemic and the urgency for a strong and concerted effort to cultivate training, research and capacity in public health in order to develop and maintain a prepared cadre of public health experts and professionals. Looking back on that statement, ASPHER asserted the need for such competencies, not only for an emergency pandemic, but also for response to regional insecurity.³ It is terrible how prescient that was, given the critical public health response now required for war on European soil⁴ while the pandemic itself still rages.⁵

ASPHER has considerable reasons to be proud of the work of our members to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of you pushed through long hours to respond, setting up critical response units in hospitals, supporting vulnerable communities, advising your governments, directing call centres for contact testing – to name just a few that were documented in ASPHER newsletters⁶ and in the report from our survey of schools' response.⁷ You answered as well to the ASPHER call to join the ASPHER COVID-19 Task Force, which has brought together your collective knowledge and expertise from across the European Region and beyond to produce a truly remarkable body of work speaking from schools' perspective to different public health aspects that emerged from the pandemic.⁸ The Task Force was greatly supported and would not be what it is today without a highly motivated cadre of ASPHER Young Professionals (YPs) who also chose to step up and contribute their time and energy. The task force involved more than 60 individuals, from over 30 member schools in more than 20 countries, and involved colleagues from four continents. The task force has published more than 30 papers in peer review journals.

The circumstances under which ASPHER and our members have had to operate over the course of the past two years have often been less than ideal leading to sometimes slow and inadequate response to the pandemic. Public health has suffered from major cuts in funding in part due to the economic crisis as well as government austerity policies. We

must demand investment in public health⁹, and in primary care¹⁰ to fill gaps in preparedness and resources, and to train and equip a competent public health workforce. This will be crucial in the decade to come as ASPHER will continue to highlight the pandemic's exacerbation of many health inequalities and their enduring legacies, and will help develop and support with the necessary competencies and capabilities in the public health workforce.^{11,12}

At the same time we must also demand respect and protection for public health professionals. Public health has come into the public eye in ways that were unprecedented, after an extended time period when most in Europe have benefited from general good health, peace and wellbeing. However, too often there has been a failure to listen to recommendations of scientific experts and, more generally, a lack of dialogue between academia and policy-makers.⁹ At times this has manifested itself to an extreme degree with threats of violence against scientists and public health professionals (from national experts to local practitioners) as people's frustration levels and fatigue have increased due to suffering wave after wave of confinement, restricted movement, and other decisions - many of which may be wrongly-portrayed as excessive public health measures.¹³

For these reasons ASPHER believes the time is right and there can be no delay to implement the Association's professionalisation agenda. Together with the WHO, we have recently published the WHO-ASPHER Roadmap to Professionalization, which offers pragmatic recommendations for action to professionalize the public health workforce as a response to growing public health needs, and providing the clarity required for countries to justify investing in public health professionals, by financing their training, employment and continuous capacity-building, as well as establishing the resources and legal/professional frameworks required to develop and secure this workforce.¹⁴ ASPHER values our developing partnership with sister associations across the six regions of the World Health Organization in the recently formed Global Network for Academic Public Health (GNAPH)¹⁵ We join with them in calling for better global public health governance, training and teaching in the future¹⁶ We call also on global leaders to bring about a new and fairer order in access to vaccines,¹⁷ and other health resources.

Finally, ASPHER wishes to congratulate and thank our Member schools and institutions, the ASPHER Covid-19 Task Force, ASPHER YPs, our partner organisations, and the whole of the public health workforce for your tireless efforts since the start of the pandemic and before. We remind you all to take the time to attend to your own wellbeing as you gather your energy to continue to fight the good fight to better the health of all people and the planet as we persist to confront today's many challenges and those that arrive on the horizon. You are ASPHER, and ASPHER stands with and through you all.

John Middleton, ASPHER President, 11 March 2022

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- 1 <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>
 - 2 [https://www.who.int/news/item/30-01-2020-statement-on-the-second-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-\(2005\)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-outbreak-of-novel-coronavirus-\(2019-ncov\)](https://www.who.int/news/item/30-01-2020-statement-on-the-second-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-(2005)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-outbreak-of-novel-coronavirus-(2019-ncov))
 - 3 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00038-020-01362-x>
 - 4 <https://www.ssph-journal.org/articles/10.3389/phrs.2022.1604880/full>
 - 5 <https://www.aspher.org/covid-19-situation-reporting.html>
 - 6 <https://www.aspher.org/aspher-newsletters.html>
 - 7 <https://www.ssph-journal.org/articles/10.3389/ijph.2021.1604138/full>
 - 8 <https://www.aspher.org/covid-19-task-force.html>
 - 9 <https://www.ssph-journal.org/articles/10.3389/phrs.2021.1604112/full>
 - 10 <https://www.aspher.org/download/1026/invest-in-primary-health-care-and-public-health.pdf>
 - 11 <https://www.aspher.org/download/428/aspher-covid-19-task-force-first-statement-on-health-inequalities-and-vulnerable-populations.pdf>
 - 12 <https://www.aspher.org/download/1037/aspher-covid-19-task-force-2nd-statement-on-inequalities.pdf>
 - 13 [Don't shoot the Piano Player, in press](#)
 - 14 <https://www.aspher.org/who-aspher-roadmap-to-professionalization.html>
 - 15 <https://www.asph.org/connect/global-network/>
 - 16 <https://www.ssph-journal.org/articles/10.3389/phrs.2021.1604610/full>
 - 17 <https://www.wfpha.org/a-vaccine-trips-waiver-now-letter-to-wto/>