

ASPHER Statement on the Novel Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Outbreak Emergency

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See <https://www.aspher.org/aspher-covid19-statement-signatories.html> for the full list of signatories

With the outbreak of novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) we are currently experiencing a worldwide emergency affecting all societies. Fortunately, we have learnt much since the 1918/19 influenza pandemic, and we have come a long way towards controlling infectious diseases. Smallpox has been eradicated, cases of measles and poliomyelitis have been drastically reduced, and much has been achieved in mitigating HIV. Still, we now must coordinate efforts on a global scale to stop the spread of COVID-19, an epidemic with grave consequences. Globalization, ease of travel and open borders present challenges; but the degree of scientific progress and the free exchange of rapidly generated knowledge also afford important opportunities not available in previous outbreaks. These opportunities must be put to good use; this is where public health plays a critical role.

Countries have responded to COVID-19 with a range of measures reflecting national values, political imperatives, and variations in scientific advice from local experts. At times, political considerations have driven response more than science. The COVID-19 crisis appears likely to present a protracted challenge, which will require preparedness, necessitating a harmonisation of measures and coordinated response between countries across the European Region and globally. The role of the World Health Organization (WHO) during the crisis is essential, as global and local governance of COVID-19 requires ethical, evidence-based collective action; consistent messaging, recommendations and guidelines; and protective measures for the population and for vulnerable groups. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) plays a critical role in cross-border protections and its past actions have greatly contributed to in-country capacity building in infectious disease expertise. **ASPHER, as Europe's representative organisation for Schools of Public Health, calls on all countries to strengthen the role and resources available to the WHO and to align with WHO policies. ASPHER supports sustaining and strengthening the ECDC mandate for international action. ASPHER calls on Europe's governing bodies, the European Commission and individual countries: to recognize the specific expertise of public health professionals involving them in decision-making to effectively coordinate European and in-country action; to invest adequate funding and resources in health systems, essential public health operations, planning and preparedness; and to include health in all policies.**

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis will not be our last, laying bare the urgency of 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. It is necessary to emphasize public health approaches and knowledge in other professions, bolstering multi-professional teams and cross-discipline collaboration. Moreover, the level of individual responsibility needed to comply with containment measures, emphasizes the requirement for a population that is health literate and the urgency to combat misinformation. Schools of Public Health promote multidisciplinary approaches, exchange knowledge of practice and public policies, and engage with European and international networks. Schools of Public Health have expertise to prepare public health leadership in how to organise and manage health care systems, in health protection and disease prevention, and in public communication. Whether dealing with an emergency pandemic, long-term threats such as climate change and regional insecurity, or routine measures to protect the public's health, we need such competencies. However, too often in the past, resources for public health training and education have been eroded or neglected leading to a poor state of preparedness and weakened response to the COVID-19 outbreak. **ASPHER calls for an allocation of resources toward specific emergency training on COVID-19 and for a renewed long-term investment in public health education and training at all levels.** ASPHER is committed to stand with, reinforce and coordinate the efforts of our over 100 member schools and programmes of public health across the European Region and beyond to invigorate and strengthen the field of public health for the good of the people we serve.
