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What did you do at work today?

John B. Lowe

ANZJPH Editor-in-Chief

Priscilla Robinson, Melissa Stoneham, Sandra Campbell

ANZJPH Editors

Many of us with children have been met with this question as we walk in the door after a busy day. It's usually not an easy question for a public health professional to answer. A medical practitioner can explain how they helped individuals with their health issues, patient by patient. A solicitor can talk about the legal needs of individuals, case by case. For a public health professional, the answer is generally more complicated and convoluted because we work at the population level and our outcomes often take years to achieve. In public health, we tend not to spend a lot of time dwelling on our successes. Yet, if it was not for public health professionals, thousands and possibly hundreds of thousands of Australians and New Zealanders would be spending this holiday season without a loved one. We can, and should, celebrate our successes. As you get ready for the festive season, take some time to reflect on some of these successes.

If it was not for our efforts in tobacco control and prevention many more Australians would be suffering from tobacco-related illnesses. Our efforts to improve cessation efforts, expand areas where smoking is no longer permitted, help smokers quit and ensure people are not exposed to the devastating effects of second-hand smoke all need to be celebrated.¹ It has been the public health professionals who, through our world-leading policy work in plain packaging, have helped Australians further reduce their risk of dying from a tobacco-related disease.²

Our infectious control and immunisation programs have reduced the burden of death and disease. The risk of being affected by devastating diseases, such as cholera, tuberculosis, and measles, has been significantly reduced if not eliminated due to public health efforts. We lead the world in controlling the spread of HIV and many Australians are alive today due to these efforts. We now consider it to be a public health failure if such an event does occur. Consider the general western response to

Ebola virus 3, the lack of preparedness for major outbreaks of communicable diseases such as influenza, or the local outrage about Legionellosis.

Because of the public health slant of many coronial inquiries and subsequent legislation, people accept that wearing a seat belt in a vehicle,³ and a helmet when riding a bicycle,⁴ having a childproof gated fence around a swimming pool,^{5, 6} and having safe food to eat and water to drink,⁷ are just part of everyone's everyday way of life.

The list goes on and on; others have written about these and many other achievements.⁸

While we have had many successes, we are facing one of the world's leading health issues, and possibly the greatest health threat: climate change. The sustainability of Earth depends on us seeking solutions to address climate change.⁹ The science around climate change is complex. It is population-based concern not an individual risk factor that we are addressing. This is a challenge as it requires urgent cultural, political and individual change. As public health professionals, we need immediate action by broad-based coalitions that share, and can express, a consensus view on what the most effective population-based climate strategies are – whether these are environmental, social, political or health-related. The solutions will need strong and robust advocacy efforts. This will only be achievable when all parties agree and participate to improve global health and wellbeing. Often, despite good progress, consensus building can be side-tracked when we have no choice but to respond to issues such as the current Ebola outbreak.¹⁰ Yet, good advocacy takes time and patience is required to ensure we point to new horizons and possibilities. Strategies at the individual behavioural level, a focus on equity and supporting vulnerable groups, policy development and analysis, and a multinational agreement are urgently needed. At the centre of climate change is sustainable development and many of the Rio Principles discuss equity.

Bearing that in mind and reflecting back on the question posed by this editorial, the most important thing we should tell our children and friends when they ask what we did at work today, is that, in public health, we are working together to ensure they will have the same, if not better, quality of health in the future as we now have and, just as an aside, we save lives – millions at a time.

On behalf of the editors, the editorial board and everyone at the journal, we wish you the best for the holidays and the year ahead. Enjoy a safe and happy festive season.

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