Public health and colonialism: a new or old problem?

Epidemiology is not alone as a discipline in facing awesome challenges. It would also be wrong to ascribe to epidemiology any particular failures; many disciplines have shared difficult times as the world around them is restructured. What is at stake for the entire spectrum of public health disciplines—from “hard” medicine to “soft” policy—is nothing more than a need to re-think their own role in the new global social order. Gradually, the enormity of the economic changes that have been pushed through by the neo-liberal project are becoming clear to the public health movement.

Knowing this, can we justify investment in ever more sophisticated “technical fixes” for what we know are socially created health problems? Is the future of policy to make the new global division of labour ever more efficient when this leads to social inequalities that are themselves a determinant of ill health? Is surgery’s contribution to the global coronary heart disease epidemic only to conduct ever more bypass operations when it is the Western diet (now being sold worldwide) that needs to be confronted?

These are big questions and lead to the realisation that a re-think of the conception and practice of public health in the 21st century is long overdue. Put starkly, is the public health movement going to bow down or stand up to the new global social order. Gradually, the enormity of the economic changes that have been pushed through by the neo-liberal project are becoming clear to the public health movement.

In this context, the use of the term “colonialism” should be welcomed back into debate about public health. Although it grates and is probably a little crude, it points to many disciplines—from “hard” medicine to “soft” policy—is nothing more than a need to re-think their own role in the new global social order. Gradually, the enormity of the economic changes that have been pushed through by the neo-liberal project are becoming clear to the public health movement.

For 20 years, since a neo-liberal orthodoxy triumphed in Western politics and economic management, dissident voices have been hushed. The intellectual space for criticism diminished, in part because of funding, work schedules, etc, and in part because of specialisation and exhaustion. But civil society, in particular Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), is leading the way in rolling back this shroud. At Seattle, in December 1999, an unforeseen alliance of public interest groups came together to protest at the new order. Having failed to get even token reforms into the 1994 Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), they were left only with the right to protest. They brought to a halt the latest round of what Watkins memorably called “fixing the rules”.

Suddenly, space to debate is emerging. While the “realists” argued that globalisation cannot be stopped, the Seattle movements remind us that social reality is made not given. All who work to promote public health need to seize this chance and debate core ideas and themes. We need to be unashamedly partisan in promoting public, not just individual, health and to rediscover our roots in social medicine. We need to engage with thorny governance issues, siding with the health democrats over the control tendency. Our role is to promote policy integration over fragmentation, and to provide an evidence base for just and equitable public policy and practice. This can only be done by recognising not disguising the raw inequalities of power that were unfolded by the neo-liberal project geo-spatially, in both North and South, East and West.