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STAFFING OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Report on a WHO Working Group

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1996

EUR/HFA target 18, 19

TARGET 18

POLICY ON ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH

By the year 2000, all Member States should have developed, and be implementing, policies on the environment and health that ensure ecologically sustainable development, effective prevention and control of environmental health risks and equitable access to healthy environments.

TARGET 19

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH MANAGEMENT

By the year 2000, there should be effective management systems and resources in all Member States for putting policies on environment and health into practice.

ABSTRACT

A WHO working group, comprising experts in environmental health services, met in London in April 1996 to review a guidance document on professional capacity building in these services. The document is intended to be one of a series of guidance documents being developed by the WHO Regional Office for Europe. The group considered the scope and purpose of the document, reviewed draft chapters on the functions and tasks of environmental health services and competences for environmental health professionals, and considered the purpose of the remaining chapters of the document, which are to deal with the governance and organization of environmental health professionals. The group's views on these issues will be taken into consideration in preparing further drafts of the guidance document. In addition, the group suggested appropriate procedures for further review of the document before its submission for final approval at a consultative meeting of Member States.

Keywords

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH
HEALTH SERVICES
MANAGEMENT
HEALTH OCCUPATIONS – education
EUROPE

Scope and purpose

One of the priority actions endorsed by the Second European Conference on Environment and Health, Helsinki, 20–22 June 1994 is strengthening the professional capacities of environmental health services in the Member States to deal effectively with environmental health hazards. The World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe (WHO/EURO) is working closely with Member States to assist them in developing their capacities in environmental health management. Following the Consultation on Environmental Health Services meeting in Vilnius, 28–30 November 1994, the Member States adopted a proposal to implement a project dealing specifically with staffing, professional education and training in environmental health services.

A working group meeting was held in Dublin, Ireland from 2–4 March 1995, to discuss and explore the options available for developing the environmental health staffing, professional education and training project. The participants' list is in Annex 1. A methodology for proceeding with the project was devised and a suite of tasks to be undertaken were identified. These tasks involve building up a comprehensive picture of the fundamental tasks of environmental health services and from this identifying the specific competencies required to fulfil these tasks. Working from this base, further work on the development of appropriate training curricula is being addressed by the project.

Missions by staff and consultants from the Environmental Health Planning/Ecology unit were carried out in a number of Member States during the previous year. These missions included investigations of the scope of work carried out by environmental health services in these countries, as well as the skills and competences required to carry out these duties. Consultation with a wide range of educational institutions involved in the training of professionals engaged in environmental health related disciplines has also taken place.

The result of this work will be the development of a guidance document on the staffing of environmental health services in the European Region.

The purpose of this meeting was to:

- review drafts of the major sections of this document;
- approve the methodology for completing the initial draft of document;
- agree on a review process for the final document to be submitted for adoption by the Member States.

Matters for consideration

The participants were asked to consider the following specific issues:

- to review the purpose, rationale, and target audiences of this guidance document on the staffing of environmental health services in the European Region;
- to discuss the layout and content of the document;
- to review in detail the chapters of the document dealing with the tasks and competences of environmental health services;
- to review the comprehensiveness of the list of professionals currently involved in environmental health services, as presented to the meeting;

- to develop environmental health professional profiles that could be incorporated into the document;
- to discuss the places of delivery for environmental health services in the context of developing recommendations for the staffing document;
- to develop a methodology for the review process for this document.

Rationale, target audiences and layout of the guidance document

The rationale and the methodology adopted in producing this document was discussed in detail. It was explained that the document is intended to provide a practical tool for assisting in the development of environmental health services, and therefore practical aspects of environmental health staffing have been emphasized throughout. It was also emphasized that this work was both a continuation and integral component of WHO/EURO's activities in environmental health services in recent years.

A number of important issues were raised in the subsequent discussion, including the need to clearly identify target audiences for the document, as this has a major bearing on both the content and presentation of the document. Target audiences were considered to include not just environmental health services but also private industry, educational institutions, and human resources managers.

The need to address the growing trend towards privatization of environmental health services in the European Region was discussed at length, as was the need to identify how this document might be used by Member States in working towards the harmonization of national policies with supranational and regional policies.

Participants agreed that environmental health services, as dealt with in this document, constitute just one element, albeit a very important one, in the overall environmental health system, and this relationship must be dealt with in subsequent drafts.

Participants also agreed that this document should serve as a strong argument to health service managers and policy makers for the development of holistic environmental health services, and for demonstrating the added value achieved in developing such services.

A comprehensive range of editorial comments on the general layout of the document were suggested at this stage of the discussion for incorporation into the final draft.

Review of chapter on tasks of environmental health services

This chapter describes the various tasks that might be carried out by *environmental health services*. The importance of particular tasks, and the manner in which they are carried out will obviously vary from country to country, in view of the particular needs of individual Member States. Participants decided that as a first step, the title of this chapter should be modified to "Functions and tasks of environmental health services".

Discussions on this chapter elicited a wide range of comments regarding specific sections, as follows.

- Development of environmental health policy must be emphasized as a central function of environmental health services.
- The concept that environmental health services must develop national environmental health action plans should be promoted.
- Member States need guidance on developing a methodology for prioritizing core areas of environmental health, with regard to the individual needs of each country.
- Many of the core areas identified are horizontal in nature in that they covered a wide range of media. Particular attention was given to targets 18 and 19 of WHO strategy for health for all, which deal with environmental health management and control. Participants gave an unequivocal endorsement to treating these issues as specific core areas of environmental health in their own right. It was acknowledged that putting such concepts into written form is problematic, and a range of suitable graphics to explain these were considered for possible use in the final document.

Participants also considered that some of the categories of task identified in this chapter required more detailed explanation and clarification. These included:

- *risk assessment* – including the differentiation between “risk” and “hazard”;
- *risk management* – required more detailed explanation;
- *clinical medicine* – was considered as too narrow a definition, and should be expanded to include health assessment, social wellbeing and health promotion;
- *risk communication* – and the need to deal with self-protecting behaviour.

Other tasks requiring clarification included the discussion of quality control and accreditation of educational courses for environmental health.

One vital issue the participants considered was missing from the document, was reference to the integration of the precautionary principle in the development of environmental health policy. This issue profoundly effects the manner in which policy is developed, and is one of the most important elements in the European Charter on Environment and Health.

Detailed comments were made on each of the core areas of environmental health identified. Among the suggestions made was the need to cross-reference areas of overlap in such tasks, a good example being accidents and traffic management. In relation to accidents, some form of preamble is required to highlight the many scenarios in which accidents occur.

One of the major editorial decisions made was to incorporate a degree of repetition in relation to the major tasks that have to be undertaken in each of the core throughout the chapter. This was considered necessary in order to stress the need for common action over the wide range of areas identified. In addition to these, the specific actions required in each of the core areas would also be developed.

In many Member States, environmental health services have an increasingly important role in auditing and validating self regulation and self auditing management systems, by industrial and other concerns, in the both the public and private sector. The adoption of internationally recognized standards for these systems of management has provided a major driving force for this trend in many countries. In view of these developments, it was considered vital that these

functions and tasks be promoted as an integral component of the function and task of environmental health services.

Other crucial roles for environmental health services considered included advocacy of environmental health issues, health promotion, developing consultation and teamwork between ministries and departments, and the accreditation of laboratories and product safety.

Review of Chapter on Environmental Health Services Competences

This chapter deals with the requisite blend of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for environmental health professionals. While this chapter was seen as having many worthwhile elements, it was considered that a good deal of editorial changes was necessary. In particular, it was thought that a very clear link between environmental health services functions and tasks as described in the preceding chapter, and the competencies necessary, as described in this chapter, had to be established.

Participants thought that one of the fundamental issues that had to be dealt with in this chapter was to explain why competence in environmental health issues is such an important issue. The basic work carried out in delineating competence in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes was considered valuable, but the subsequent follow through on this was not as clearly defined in the text. A number of methodologies for developing these themes in a more logical manner were discussed, and a general approach agreed.

There was a wide-ranging discussion of the importance of developing competences in the area of sustainable development and fostering democratic principles and practices.

Development of environmental health professional profiles

The purpose of this chapter of the guidance document is to synthesize the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for performing the functions and tasks of an environmental health service in a range of discrete professional profiles.

Participants considered that it imperative that this and the subsequent chapters of the document must not be over-prescriptive in manner or content. It was considered more beneficial to develop guidance on the general principles of staffing for various levels in environmental health services, the development of teams of environmental health professionals, and on how existing staff resources can best be utilized. There was also a perceived need to develop guidance on a professional profile for technical assistants within environmental health services who could carry out a range of routine tasks.

The need to develop professional profiles that tackled the issues of health and social gain as well as the management of change were also seen as vital. In this sense the document should be seen as an opportunity to market environmental health skills. The accreditation and mutual recognition of qualifications was discussed and the need for further elaboration on this was recognized.

Review of range of professionals currently involved in environmental health services

The meeting was presented with a list of professionals engaged in environmental health services throughout the European Region. This was considered useful, in that it gave an overview of the various possibilities available to Member States. It was stressed that while this list is extensive, it is not intended to be either exhaustive or prescriptive. This last point was welcomed by participants, who questioned the affordability of having such a wide range of expertise available, particularly at local level. The valuable role of generalist environmental health professionals in such situations was highlighted.

The delineation of environmental health professionals into three broad groups of professionals, namely technicians, specialists, and managers was discussed. The various career and study tracks necessary to achieve these levels were explored in detail. The findings of this discussion will be incorporated into later drafts of this guidance document and a subsequent document on curricula development.

Review places of delivery for environmental health services

This discussion centred on developing general principles of staffing for various levels in environmental health services, the development of team work among environmental health professionals, and on how existing staff resources can best be utilized.

The issues of accountability, transparency of policy, and the growing movement towards privatization in environmental health services were reiterated as particular issues of concern. The need to develop a clear conceptual framework for national level environmental health services was identified as a very important element of this document.

The influences of international issues on the formation of national policies, and the implications for much of the work carried by environmental health services were also discussed in detail. It was recognized that it is important for environmental health professionals to understand these influences, and to have the capacities to be involved in international activities and negotiations.

Methodology for completing the initial draft, and review process for the final document

Participants agreed that in order to incorporate many of the issues raised in the above, a major reworking of the latter half of the document was necessary. This would involve condensing the last three chapters as originally proposed into two chapters. The first of these revised chapters would deal with issues of good governance for environmental health services, while the second would deal with technical issues of staffing.

It was proposed that a draft of the document be completed for external review by a range of suitable external reviewers in August 1996. The completed document will subsequently be submitted for approval to a consultative meeting of Member States in late 1996.

Annex 1

PARTICIPANTS

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