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Opinion: University of Memphis public health diplomacy summit emphasizes unity of purpose

This summit demonstrated how a “we, not me,” way of thinking will lead the way to advance public health innovations

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The words "we" and "me" each have two letters. One word symbolizes unity. The other can instill a narrow way of thinking that leads to conflict.

One topic that needs "we" kind of thinking is the realm of public health. Those of us in academics, clinical settings and research think a lot about those two words in our daily work to address public health challenges across the globe.

Recently in Memphis, Tennessee, 15 flags representing countries that included Australia, Brazil, Germany, Grenada, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Nigeria, Qatar, South Africa, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Switzerland, and Taiwan were posted side-by-side at the first-of-its kind Public Health Diplomacy Summit.

Neighborhoods were the main topic of discussion

That grouping of flags symbolized this gathering of public health professionals that included groups associated with the United Nations, the World Health Organization and public health associations across the United States and other parts of the world.

Representatives of international organizations, members of the civic society and of course, academic and research institutions were also there.

Yet the latest research or treatment plans for the world's maladies weren't the primary topics of discussion. Our conversations were about using strategies of diplomacy to boldly confront the public health challenges in neighborhoods, whether crowded and clustered in busy urban cities or in the outskirts of a small villages on islands with limited resources.

With all its complexities, we in the profession of public health must keep at the forefront of our work to simply help people get well and stay well, both physically and emotionally. During the three-day Public Health Diplomacy Summit, our group of public health officials from opposite sides of the world met with a spirit of compassion and consensus.

We compared and discussed in detail the critical skills needed by public health officials and how those of us in academics prepare and inspire the next generation of people involved in this respected arena of health care.

How to define 'public health diplomacy'

Using this pioneering diplomatic approach, we decided at the summit's end upon a working definition for health care diplomacy:

"A multidisciplinary field that enables its practitioners to effectively communicate, facilitate, negotiate and build consensus using systems thinking, evidence-based, community-informed approaches, based on equity-focused and human-centered values to improve health and well-being for all."

That lofty and inclusive definition really, at the heart, has a simple message: "We're here to help all people to stay healthy or regain their health."

Public health diplomacy can be a gateway to improve the overall health and well-being of individuals and their families in communities everywhere.

I'm proud the University of Memphis School of Public Health organized this inaugural summit, as the event and its outcomes have gained international attention.

Diplomacy skills help unify efforts to help others

Our theme, Together We Can, highlighted the importance of collaboration, coordination, cooperation and communication to better meet the health care challenges that face our world. Yet, one more word gave the summit its overarching success: compassion.

After months of preparation for the diplomacy summit by our university staff and its many partners, we concluded our all-day discussions with a deep sense of satisfaction. I know this by the smiles, handshakes and embraces by the summit's conclusion.

Indeed, our diplomacy skills clearly reignited our unified effort to help others. This summit demonstrated how a "we, not me," way of thinking will lead the way to advance public health

innovations. By the summit's conclusion, we made a final decision, in the spirit of diplomacy, to change our theme name for this summit and future ones: Together We Will.

Diplomats have long been associated with virtues of kindness, sensitivity, and expert knowledge. Indeed, we will use those tactics to create new, innovative and broader approaches to expand our public health mission.

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