Walter Ricciardi: vision, inspiration and leadership in European public health

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European Public Health has undergone a remarkable transition over the past few years. It has a new and exciting strategy to promote and strengthen European public health, has become a major player in the European health policy arena, with strong links to major European institutions including the European Commission, European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and World Health Organization, and is much more engaged with the global public health community, especially the World Public Health Association. Its internal structures have been completely overhauled and its annual conference has gone from strength to strength, now under the auspices of a new foundation created to streamline its organization, provide financial transparency and ensure long-term sustainability. Its overall visibility is much greater, in print, broadcast and social media. These achievements owe an enormous amount to our outgoing president, Walter Ricciardi, who has stepped down after an unprecedented 4 years at the helm.

Walter’s most obvious attribute is his vision. Like many of us, he recognizes the numerous challenges that face public health, which often struggles in the face of inadequate resources, political indifference and increasingly, hostility from powerful vested interests. However, what distinguishes him is his determination to do something about this situation. The most obvious manifestation of this determination is EUPHA’s strategy. Walter led its development, providing a vision that we can all share and which is based on solid public health values. It calls for a strong voice for public health in Europe, a commitment to build public health capacity to tackle the ever changing challenges that we face and support for the next generation of public health professionals. The choice of these themes reflects his work in Italy over many years, where he has ensured that a respected voice of public health is heard in the corridors of power, both temporal and spiritual, and by politicians of all persuasions, something that is especially challenging given the frequently changing Italian political landscape. They also recall his contribution to building public health capacity in Italy, something that has required his remarkable diplomatic skills in a country that has, historically, been fragmented. Indeed, his work to establish an Italian regional health observatory takes advantage of the diversity created by these divisions. And the strategy reflects his support for junior staff, exemplified by his encouragement of EUPHA nxt, a network of almost 700 students, junior researchers, policymakers and professionals aged less than 35 years active in European public health. The care and attention he devotes to them is clear, as is the pride he takes in their success, and in turn the high regard in which he is held by a new generation of Italian public health professionals.

Equally important for EUPHA is his ability to make sure that the voice of public health in heard in the corridors of power at the European level. He has achieved this in many different ways. As a member of the European Commission’s Expert Panel on Investing in Health he has given much valuable advice to those who are charged with developing European policy, contributing his extensive knowledge, his wise counsel and his commitment to the use of evidence. Similarly, as a member of the World Health Organization’s European Advisory Committee on Health Research he has argued not only for Health in All Policies but also for Health Research in All Policies. He communicates the cause of public health not only to policy elites but is also active on Twitter and other social media.

Walter could not have achieved his goals without being a loyal and supportive colleague and a superb team player. The support that he shows for his trainees extends to everyone he works with and he has been especially supportive to colleagues in the EUPHA Office during a time of major organizational change. Managing an organization as complex as EUPHA is not easy, especially given the complex external environment with which it works. While he is by nature consensual, listening carefully to everyone’s opinions, he is also decisive when it is needed, unafraid to make difficult choices and to stick to them.

Fortunately, although he is stepping down as president, Walter will continue to be involved actively in EUPHA. Although he will have more time to pursue his other interests and spend time with his family, who have given him so much support in the past 4 years, there is still much to do, not least to ensure that the voice of European public health is much more visible on the global stage. Walter’s technical and diplomatic skills, professional stature, integrity and commitment to our shared European values make him the perfect ambassador for us. On a purely personal note, I am delighted that I will have the support of one of the most successful among my former students, in this as in so many other ways, over the 2 years of my presidency.

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