



# German Society of Public Health

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## **Executive Board of the German Society of Public Health**

### **Comment on the Leopoldina Draft Paper on Public Health in Germany**

We appreciate the interest in Public Health expressed by Leopoldina as an institution that has so far not been involved in this field. We believe that Public Health in Germany can benefit from the discussion launched by the working group's paper.

However, the draft paper emanates from a misunderstanding of Public Health and a distorted image of its state in Germany. Accordingly, the recommendations derived from these appraisals are misleading. Hence, the draft paper needs to be thoroughly revised. We basically do support the criticism on this paper passed on by Rolf Rosenbrock.

Public Health is an interdisciplinary endeavor with a focus on the health of populations which puts much emphasis on aspects such as empowerment and equity. It focuses on societal aspects of health (above all, the social determinants of health) and social, economic and political means to improve public health (above all, tackling social inequality and empowering people). Knowledge from other social sciences is more important to improve the health of populations than medicine, particularly than those aspects of medicine stressed in the draft paper (e.g. genomics), regardless of the important role medicine can play in improving the health of individual patients. This concept is widely supported by the international public health community. For instance, the recommendations of generally accepted public health institutions (e.g. the Council on Education for Public Health in the U.S. or the European Accreditation Agency for Public Health Education) rank among the core disciplines of Public Health:

- methods in public health
- epidemiology, population health and its determinants
- health policy and health economics
- management and administration of health services
- health education and promotion
- social and behavioural sciences

- cross-disciplinary themes (mandatory or elective): biology for public health, law, ethics, ageing, nutrition, maternal and child health, mental health, demography, IT use, health informatics, leadership and decision-making, social psychology, global public health, marketing, communication and advocacy, health anthropology, human rights, programme planning and development, public health genomics, technology assessment).

We do not find these crucial aspects adequately represented in the draft paper. Instead, a narrow understanding of public health is presented which considerably overestimates the role of medicine. We do not challenge the importance of medicine, nor of a collaboration between medicine and social science. In its present state, however, the draft paper disregards the character of Public Health as a predominantly social science. As a consequence, it misinterprets the challenges public health is facing today and fails to adequately assess the state of Public Health in Germany. It restricts the assessment of Public Health to some alleged shortcomings and weaknesses but dispenses with outlining what has been achieved by public health research, education and interventions since its comeback in the early 1990s (e.g. advancement in epidemiology and social epidemiology, HIV prevention, protection of non-smokers). Public Health is being described as a discipline that needs the strong shoulder of medicine to lean on in order to be revived. Thus, the draft paper fails to give sound recommendations for strengthening academic Public Health in this country.

As Public Health is first and foremost to be regarded as a social science, we strongly believe that the Helmholtz Society does not provide an adequate institutional frame for a National Centre of Public Health to be situated at. The Helmholtz Society is an association of research centres focusing on technical and biomedical research. Establishing a National Centre of Public Health at this association would contribute to strengthen or even to perpetuate a biomedical orientation of public health. This is why we are opposing it to be configured as a member of the Helmholtz Society.

We are enthusiastic supporters of increased investments in Public Health. However, establishing a new public health institution at a national level is a crucial decision that has to be considered thoroughly. What kind of research is it expected to conduct? What are its duties and responsibilities meant to be? How is the relationship between the National Centre and the public health departments or faculties in universities to be designed? How does this fit into the legal framework of federal responsibility for this centre and the responsibilities of the Länder for the universities? What impact does a National Centre have on the financial resources of universities for research and teaching in Public Health? Answers to these and other questions are pending. To date, a good case for the proposal to establish a National Centre of Public Health has not really been made.

In general, we doubt that a national centre without a strong base in universities could effectively strengthen Public Health in Germany. We would give priority to extending the capacities for research and education in existing academic institutions, particularly in universities and universities for applied sciences. In the U.S. there is one School of Public Health per some ten million inhabitants. This ratio adopted to Germany would require six additional

Schools of Public Health to be established in this country. Staff for research and teaching of these schools has to cover, as a minimum requirement, the core disciplines of Public Health listed above.

If there is any National Centre to be established we would prefer it to be situated at the Leibniz Society that comprises some 90 research centres conducting research in a broad range of topics, including social science research. The Leibniz Society would provide an institutional environment for public health research much more appropriate. But, again, major doubts are remaining whether a National Centre for Public Health does make sense.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Thomas Gerlinger". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'T' and a long, sweeping underline.

Prof. Dr. Dr. Thomas Gerlinger

on behalf of the Executive Board  
of the German Society of Public Health