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Conference Report: 'Promoting Health: Public Health's Return to Local Authorities 4 Years On'

The Institute of Health Promotion and Education's annual conference was held at Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, England in July 2017. The conference, with a focus on evaluating and reflecting on the success and challenges of public health being located in local authorities, was well-attended by public health practitioners, senior health leaders, academics and researchers, and students of public health and health promotion.

Sylvia Tilford, the IHPE President, set the context for conference, the subsequent key note lectures and speaker presentations. Opening the conference, Sylvia reflected on the recent history of health promotion and public health, highlighting the political as well as practical challenges faced in contemporary times in the context of the United Kingdom (UK). Sylvia also reflected on the significance of hosting the conference at Leeds Beckett University (formerly Leeds Metropolitan University) where postgraduate education in public health and health promotion had been taught for over four decades.

The key note lectures and speaker presentations were eclectic in nature, but bound by several common themes. One of the themes included the current challenges faced in the United Kingdom by austerity and shrinking financial resources for public health in local authorities. That said, the opportunity to think creatively about how to 'do' public health differently was also a strong thread throughout the day. Penny Spring's opening key note lecture, which reflected on her own direct experiences of being a Director of Public Health, portrayed the realities faced by those in senior public health leadership roles and the difficult choices they faced. Despite this, Penny's presentation was upbeat and refreshing – focussing very much on the social model of health, the concept of salutogenesis and harnessing assets in communities which are all central to health promotion whatever the context. Professor Jane South's presentation later in the conference further expanded on the notion of communities and the importance of people in shaping and contributing to the public health agenda. Jane's research on the role of volunteers in public health was discussed, highlighting the value of lay people enhancing and adding to, not replacing, the broader health promotion and public health workforce.

Isabelle Goldie, Director of Development and Delivery at the Mental Health Foundation, and Sheila Merrill, from RoSPA, outlined in their respective presentations the continuing, and arguable growing, contribution of the charity sector in promoting health and protecting public health. Isabelle Goldie's presentation showed the prevalence of mental health issues across society and clearly showed how the social and political environment shaped mental health outcomes - factors that are crucial in every context across the globe. The influence of working conditions, poverty and education were all shown to have a significant influence. Isabelle discussed the ways in which the policy agenda has and can be shaped through lobbying and advocacy by organisations such as the Mental Health Foundation to ensure that mental health can be supported and better funded. Sheila Merrill's keynote showed the prevalence of accidents in the home and the alarming statistics which demonstrated the numbers of young children being seriously injured. Sheila's powerful presentation focussed in part on blind cords in the home and the work that RoSPA had done to ensure regulations were in place to make blinds safer and to prevent children from harm. The importance of regulation and legislation as a tool to protect public health clearly emanated from the presentation.

The final key note presentations of the day from Mary Dawson (HENRY Regional Manager) and Gary Bickerstaffe (Health Improvement Specialist), both shared the theme of tackling contemporary public health threats – in this case obesity. Mary Dawson's focus was on children and the work that

the organisation HENRY has done to provide evidence-based early years training courses for all practitioners working with families. Gary Bickerstaffe's presentation focussed on a different approach to tackling obesity through influencing healthy food choices in a hospital setting. He proposed a new model for the UK's National Health Service procurement of food and drink for visitors and patients and suggested a healthier approach to marketing within the hospital context.

The conference was a very good opportunity to examine and reflect upon contemporary health promotion and public health in England. The conference benefitted from a valuable poster display which formed the focus of the lunchtime networking and conversations. A myriad of topics were covered in the posters, including some excellent student research. The questions and panel discussion toward the end of the day demonstrated that the conference had generated a great deal of interest from the delegates. The event was superbly organised and particular thanks goes to the IHPE committee members for their efforts in creating a very worthwhile and stimulating day.

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