

The WHO Global Health Histories project:

New seminars and more initiatives for 2011

Article by Thomson Prentice

A new series of lunchtime seminars beginning in February 2011 marks the continuing expansion and development of the WHO Global Health Histories project (GHH).

The new series follows the successful conclusion of the 2010 seminars, which focused on a wide range of issues of emerging public health importance, and the meetings in 2011 will continue to be supported by the Wellcome Trust and the University of York.

The ten seminars in 2010 most often drew capacity audiences at the venues in WHO headquarters, as well as being broadcast as webinars on the Internet. Almost 50 history seminars have now been held under the GHH banner in the last six years.

An innovation for 2011 is that in the first half of the year, the seminars will provide background and potential input for the next *World Health Report*, due to be published in 2012, which will be on the theme of "research for health". Although the *Report* has invariably drawn on history in its coverage of global health issues since its launch in 1995, this is the first time it will have a formal link with GHH.

Subjects will include infant growth and nutrition, ante-natal care, health promotion, tobacco control, maternal care, childhood immunization and food security. In the second half of the year, the theme of the seminars will be environmental health, with presentations on asbestos pollution and environmental law. (*See full list*).

Global Health Histories was established in late 2004 and is located within the WHO Department of Knowledge Management and Sharing. Its mission is based on the principle that understanding the history of health, especially during the last 60 years, helps the global public health community to respond to the challenges of today and help shape a healthier future for everyone, especially those most in need.

Looking forward to the 2011 events, KMS Director Dr Najeeb Al Shorbaji said "Building on the success of the Global Health History seminars in the last few years, the new series will remain focussed on the unique value of learning lessons from history. Presenting the history of public health through this global collaboration provides an excellent opportunity for academicians, researchers and practitioners. It allows them to discuss and share with the new generations of public health professionals, policy-makers and health workers, the questions of what has worked, what has not worked, and the reasons for both successes and failures.

"The Department of Knowledge Management and Sharing is committed to sustain this activity, and to expand it to include more partners and develop a wider reach. We firmly believe that understanding the past can help us to build a better future." Through the seminars, publications and other initiatives, GHH promotes closer links

and exchanges between health policy-makers and decision-takers, and historians, researchers, scientists, academics, students and the general public. In the last few years, GHH has been building an international network of health historians with expertise in a wide variety of areas. The network now extends to all of WHO's six regional offices and boasts many of the best-known names in health history.

These range from experts on the postwar origins of WHO itself, the influences on health of the Cold War and the end of colonial era on several continents, to the failure of the global malaria eradication campaign in the 1960s and the successful eradication of smallpox by 1980.

Among the sometimes-controversial subjects of the 2010 lectures were pandemic influenza, tobacco control, obesity, diabetes, mental health and plague. All of these presentations are available on this web site, as are those from previous years. (http://www.who.int/global_health_histories/seminars/2010/en). The GHH web site received over 56 000 visits in 2010 and more than 272 000 page views. (See *chart*). The presentations that attracted most webinar registrations and attendances were, respectively, those on SARS, climate change and haemorrhagic fevers.

In 2010 the project received increased support from top management at WHO and is now officially part of the WHO programme of work for 2010-2011 as an Office-specific expected result (OSER).

GHH is led by WHO Press coordinator Dr Hooman Momen, who introduces the seminars and oversees the development of the project. He said: "There is no doubt the seminars are very popular inside WHO and far beyond.

"Last year was an eventful one for GHH in several other ways. Work began on the official history of the fourth decade of WHO 1978-1987, to complement the three previous volumes on previous decades. The draft of the fourth volume is now completed and has been reviewed by all the regional offices as well as clusters at headquarters. Publication is expected by the end of 2011.

"In 2010 we also held a witness seminar to help mark the fifth anniversary of the signing of the Framework Convention for Tobacco Control. This seminar was also sponsored by the Wellcome Trust and served as pilot to measure the interest in holding more such events at WHO. The outcome was considered a success by participants. A further witness seminar is being planned in 2011 on the anti-malaria drug artemisinin."

Dr Momen said that in 2011 GHH expects to publish a book on some of the public health achievements of WHO, and this will be targeted towards a youth audience.

The Wellcome Trust continues to enthusiastically support the GHH seminars. This support has been personified by Dr Sanjoy Bhattacharya, recently appointed Reader in the History of Medicine at the University of York.

He has been a key figure in helping the development of GHH since its earliest days, and has been involved in the overall organization and support of the lunchtime seminars since 2008, initially with the Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at University College London.

He said: "The Department of History at the University of York is delighted, with the generous backing of the Wellcome Trust, to support the continued success and expansion of the Global Health Histories initiative.

"The seminars held in 2010 have taken the interactions between policy and academia to a new level, encouraging conversations that have had an impact on the work on both groups of speakers.

"They have also pointed to the great potential of stoking further interchanges of ideas between academic researchers and policy managers, both during the design and implementation of policy."

Professor Thomas Baldwin, of the University of York, was one of the 2010 speakers, with a presentation on obesity and public health. Of the seminars in general he said: "In my experience these were very stimulating occasions with excellent discussion. The range of expertise from all around the world makes these meetings unique and provided me with a broader understanding of the issues than I have encountered at similar occasions in the UK".

Dr Kavita Sivaramakrishnan, of Columbia University, New York, whose presentation on plague completed the 2010 series, said:

"What impressed me most about the GHH seminars is that they have a unique structure and format - they bring together academics and their ongoing research in global health with practitioners who bring fresh-off-the field updates on their experience of how global health works. I think they play a critical function in informing both academics and practitioners about their research field.

"The seminars also give us speakers access to an audience of WHO personnel that is both unprecedented and unique. I went away wanting to work more closely with practitioners. This was because my co-speaker in the plague seminar brought to my attention several political and conceptual questions that he encountered in global plague surveillance. These would make for fascinating new research questions which would be of interest to both academics and practitioners"

Thomson Prentice is former managing editor of the World Health Report and has helped organize the seminars since their inception. He is a freelance editor and writer.