Progress in Public Health in the Year of the Goat

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We welcome the Year of the Goat, or Sheep, depending on which version of the Chinese almanac you read. Either way, tradition tells us that it will be a calmer, more gentle year. Those born in the Year of the Goat are said to be mild-mannered and gentle, tending to be romantic about life and preferring to work in groups rather than as individuals. Of course teamwork is most important in public health and many branches of modern medicine, so perhaps it is good to be a goat to work in our field. We can expect a slower, more caring year following the energetic Year of the Horse. But unfortunately in public health, this seems rather unlikely, as we continue to face challenges for public health that remain from last year.

The Ebola epidemic of 2014 reminded us that public health will continue to be challenged by infectious diseases, both traditional public health problems and newly emerging diseases. In our region, the increasing public health challenges of infections are driven by pressures of urbanisation, growing populations and climate change. It is said that the Year of the Horse brings dramatic action and surprises, and this is what happened with the Ebola epidemic in West Africa. Ebola damaged the reputation of the World Health Organisation as its response faltered in the face of an epidemic with rapid onset, high case fatality rates and the poor health infrastructure available in the West African countries. The public health community responded quickly with volunteers joining its workforce and support for the WHO and its policies¹. Ebola is but one of a number of dangerous infectious diseases that if they emerge or re-emerge in Asia, will challenge all of our resources. While Ebola has recently grabbed headlines, SARS, MERS and Lassa fever, to name but a few, are examples of other potentially deadly outbreaks. While having a much lower case fatality, epidemics of dengue and the lesser known chikungunya are major public health issues in the Asia-Pacific region²,³.

WHO estimates there may be 50-100 million dengue infections worldwide every year, with a high (and increasing proportion) in the Asia-Pacific region ⁴,⁵. Before 1970 only nine countries had experienced severe dengue epidemics, but now it has spread to more than 100 countries. In our region it is found in Korea in the north, Australia in the south, and into many of the Pacific Islands. Work continues on the development of vaccines and there is some hope that the Year of the Goat will bring success. The development of all new vaccines is very expensive and initial costs of any new dengue vaccine will be high, and reminiscent of early experiences with the Hepatitis B vaccine, and will require extensive public health advocacy to make it available to at-risk populations.

As populations continue to increase and urbanisation proceeds at an even greater rate, more pressure is placed on existing public health services and the challenge of providing food, water

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and sanitation to our cities. The 2015 World Health Day on April 7 will emphasise the importance of Food Safety, a continuing public health problem. In early life, contaminated water and food causes diarrhoeal disease and a million child deaths each year, the second leading cause of death in children under the age of 5 years. Most of these are preventable with clean water supplies, appropriate food hygiene and adherence to WHO/UNICEF advice on breastfeeding6.

An additional challenge to food service hygiene in our region is increasing movement of populations, including tourism, and the commercial provision of food requires continuing public health education and supervision. Cruise ships are becoming more common in our waters, and large populations in confined spaces with common exposures make outbreaks of infectious diseases, including food borne diseases, more likely. For some years cruise ships have been the focus of a program of the CDC in the US, who monitor all ships entering its waters and provide continuing advice on food hygiene7. In 2015, Schools of Public Health in the Asia-Pacific region need to recommit to the teaching of infectious disease epidemiology and prevention to continue providing qualified staff for these services.

One last word on goats. Goat milk is a common food in our region, with readily available protein and many nutrients. Commercial supplies should always be pasteurised to ensure microbiological safety. Goat milk should not be used for feeding infants under the age of 12 months. Breastmilk is preferable, but in the rare cases where breastmilk is not available, goat milk infant formula is not advisable and a cow milk formula should be used. Goat milk has a higher protein content than cow milk formula and hence is more likely to cause obesity in children8. Despite some popular myths, goat milk is just as likely, and possibly more so, to cause food allergies.

During this Year of the Goat, the APJPH will continue to publish public health research of high quality together with timely commentaries and reviews. We are increasing the number of articles that we publish each year and we hope to be able to catch up on the backlog of accepted papers that are still waiting to be printed. May this Year of the Goat be a year of collaboration and teamwork to progress for health in our region.

References