

**First meeting of the Public Health Research Network (PHR-Net)**

*Key topic of the meeting:* establishment of the Public Health Research Network (PHR-Net)

**Dates:** April 16-17, 2009

**Venue:** Maastricht, the Netherlands

---

The first meeting of the Public Health Research Network (PHR-Net) was organized under the auspices of the University of Maastricht (UM). The main aim of the meeting was the formal establishment of PHR-Net and agreement on the mission, vision and activities of this network. A detailed agenda of the 2-day meeting is provided in Appendix 1.

The meeting was attended by several members of the Department of International Health (INTHEALTH) and representatives from seven Southeast European (SEE) countries namely Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia. A detailed list of participants is provided in Appendix 2.

A short summary of the minutes of the meeting is provided below.

### **Day 1**

The central theme of the first day of the meeting was the common agreement on the need and willingness to establish an effective public health research network involving all SEE countries and possibly also other CEE countries:

- After the welcome note and a brief description of the working agenda by Prof. Helmut Brand (Head of INTHEALTH), Prof. Nanne de Vries presented the current research projects of the School for Public Health and Primary Care (CAPHRI).
- Subsequently, Genc Burazeri (INTHEALTH), Helmut Brand and Ulrich Laaser (Germany) discussed about the composition, aim and scope of work of the PHR-Net.
- Genc Burazeri elaborated on several issues related to the current status of research work in SEE countries including achievements, as well as challenges and problems faced.
- The meeting was followed by a series of presentations where each SEE colleague elaborated in-depth about the current status of research work in his/her own country (respectively in Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia). All the country presentations (in PowerPoint format) will soon be available online.
- The first day of the meeting was concluded with a vivid discussion about priorities for public health research in SEE region (see below the section: *“Proposed activities of the PHR-Net”*).

## **Day 2**

During the second day of the meeting there were discussed different strategies to pursue and potential activities which are to be carried out in the framework of the established PHR-Net:

- Doncho Donev (Macedonia) focused on the urgent need to identify and strengthen suitable capacities to conduct public health research work in SEE countries. Such potential capacities should be mainly sought in different academic institutions including the emerging schools of public health as well as other training institutions in the region. Furthermore, research capacities should be sought in the institutes of public health and the civil society including national public health associations which, in some SEE countries, were strengthened and supported in the framework of a joint OSI-ASPHER project in mid-2000.
- Vesna Bjegovic (Serbia) provided a detailed and comprehensive analysis of potential donors and funding agencies for conducting public health research work in the SEE region. The main funding institutions for multilateral research cooperation within the region include the EU agencies (DG SANCO), UN agencies (UNDP, UNICEF, WHO) and the World Bank. Furthermore, bilateral cooperation should be sought with a main focus on cooperation with such institutions as USAID, DIFID, CIDA, SIDA, or DFG.
- Stephan van den Broucke (INTHEALTH) provided a systematic approach to application procedures targeted to a wide range of funding institutions and agencies, with a particular focus on the FP7 structure (deadline for forthcoming applications: September 2009) and also the possibility for applying to PHEA (deadline: May 2010).
- Milena Pavlova (BEOZ) provided a general overview of the European Framework Program (FP7) including the application procedures, conditions, eligibility, content and format of application, contacts and deadlines for applications. At a more specific level, the project *“Assessment of patient payment policies and projection of their efficiency, equity and quality effects: The case of Central and Eastern Europe”* was presented as a successful example of research work conducted in the structure of FP7 (see also her power point series online).

- Florentina Furtunescu (Romania) provided further details about prerequisites and preconditions (including financial details) of FP7 projects (see also her power point series online).
- Genc Burazeri (INTHEALTH) presented a proposal for a joint survey in SEE region including high-school children and university students. The proposed topic is as follows: *“Road safety, domestic violence, mental health disorders, and attitudes towards the European Union integration among high-school children and university students in South Eastern Europe”*. The suggestion is to undertake a multifaceted survey in the SEE region which would eventually produce a multitude of original findings important both to potential determinants of road traffic accidents, domestic violence and mental health disorders (including perceptions/attitudes towards transition/EU accession), as well as to the more practical public health aspects of identification of vulnerable risk groups among youth for intervention and social action. From this point of view, the aim of the proposed survey is to assess the *prevalence* and *determinants* of road safety practices, domestic violence and mental health disorders (including attitudes towards transition/EU integration) among high-school children and university students in SEE countries. All participants discussed and elaborated on the technicalities of conducting such a survey in their respective countries. The main challenge relates to the budget required for data collection and data entry. To overcome this, the suggestion is to involve MPH or Ph.D. students who could write a thesis on this topic. At a more technical level, a perceived difficulty relates to sampling procedures in countries like Croatia and Serbia.
- The last session of the meeting was entirely devoted to setting the agenda for future activities of the established PHR-Net. On a common agreement, it was decided to carry out some short-term activities up to the end of 2009. Mid- and long-term activities (2010-2012) were also considered with a particular focus on possibilities for application in the FP7 structure, as well as to PHEA. A detailed list of the proposed activities (both short- and mid-term is provided in the section: *“Proposed activities of PHR-Net”*).

## **Common Agreements and Future Steps**

### ***Name of the research network***

After considering several options, there was a common agreement on the name of the network which will be referred to as the *Public Health Research Network (PHR-Net)*. Non-specification of the SEE region in the name (and acronym) broadens the focus and opportunities of the network in terms of collaboration and cooperation with other transitional European countries, EU members, as well as other international agencies and institutions.

### ***Vision of the PHR-Net***

The research vision of the network is to investigate and explore the potential for improvement of the population's health in countries of Southeast and Eastern Europe by research into the public health evidence of interventions referred to as *translational research*. According to WHO, this paradigm (i.e. translational research) offers an invaluable alternative to the dichotomy of basic research and applied research and can be successfully applied to a wide range of public health interventions and implementation programmes. Therefore, the concept of translational research has received very strong focus in the public health and biomedical community over the last few years, as a new way of improving populations' health.

### ***Mission of the PHR-Net***

The mission of the network is to bring together the human resources and capacities for public health research in Southeast Europe, from other transitional countries in Europe and from Western EU member states. For SEE countries, potential human resources relevant for public health research work should be sought within the academic institutions (schools of public health and other educational and training institutions), institutes of public health and departments of health, as well as national public health associations.

***Composition of the PHR-Net***

The agreed composition of the PHR-Net is as follows:

- ***Core group:*** consists of one participant from each of the seven SEE countries present at the meeting and three other members from EU academic and research institutions (Germany and the Netherlands, respectively). SEE members of the core group, referred to as *ad nominem focal points*, represent leading/outstanding researchers in their own respective countries and are nominated as members of the PHR-Net based on this very capacity/competence. Nevertheless, it was consensually agreed that the focal points should be accountable and transparent in their respective countries which implies they should report and inform the research and academic public health community and health professionals at large.

More specifically, the composition of the core working group is as follows:

<i>Albania:</i>	Enver Roshi
<i>Bulgaria:</i>	Kancho Tchamov
<i>Croatia:</i>	Jadranka Bozиков
<i>Germany:</i>	Ulrich Laaser
<i>Macedonia:</i>	Doncho Donev
<i>Netherlands:</i>	Helmut Brand and Genc Burazeri
<i>Romania:</i>	Florentina Furtunescu and Adriana Galan
<i>Serbia:</i>	Vesna Bjegovic
<i>Slovenia:</i>	Tit Albreht and Lijana Zaletel-Kragelj

- ***Associated members:*** consist of the following researchers:

<i>Kosovo:</i>	Majlinda Gjocaj
<i>Moldova:</i>	Oleg Lozan
<i>International Labour Organization (ILO):</i>	Christine Wiskow

***Cooperation with other centres/countries***

Potential research cooperation will be considered in the near future with the following centres:

- Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Bielefeld, Germany

- Faculty of Medicine, Technical University, Dresden, Germany
- National School of Public Health, Rennes, France

***Secretariat of the PHR-Net***

The Secretariat of the PHR-Net will be based near the Department of International Health (INTHEALTH), Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences, Maastricht University, the Netherlands.

Genc Burazeri (assistant professor at INTHEALTH) will be in charge of the overall coordination of the network.

***Proposed activities of the PHR-Net***

The core group considered a wide range of potential activities based on public health research priorities in SEE region.

***I. Short-term activities (up to the end of 2009)***

1. *Mapping capacities for translational research:* Such a research topic would include mapping of both individual experts and research institutions. An invaluable rapid tool for cross-comparison of national research structures (registered research institutes) in various SEE countries would be the employment of online databases [Kancho Tchamov (Bulgaria) is interested to explore such a topic – Genc Burazeri would provide back-up].
2. *Survey on student careers and employers' interests and understanding:* This interesting and rather important topic will be explored by Doncho Donev (Macedonia).
3. *Health literacy survey:* Such an attractive subject would be explored based on the evidence available from existent databases [Vesna Bjegovic (Serbia) will be in charge of this topic].
4. *Youth survey in SEE region:* The aim and rationale of this survey have been explained above (Genc Burazeri will be in charge for the overall coordination of this survey).

5. *Meta-analysis of the socioeconomic determinants of health in the SEE region:*  
This appealing research topic will be led by Jadranka Bozиков (Croatia) and Vesna Bjegovic (Serbia).

## ***II. Mid-term activities***

With regard to longer term activities, the core group decided to consider the possibility of application for FP7 (deadline: September 2009) and for PHEA (deadline: May 2010).

Potential research topics which should be considered in the next 2-3 years include (but, are not confined to) the following:

1. *Improvement of social equity in health service utilization – integration of vulnerable population groups:* Examples of this important topic would be the Roma community and the low SES segments of the population with a particular focus on e.g. antenatal access to health care services.
2. *Improvement of cost-effectiveness of health care delivery – the impact of clinical guidelines:* Based on the good practice from Serbia, the cost-effectiveness impact of clinical guidelines for diabetes mellitus (but, not only) can be explored in different countries of the SEE region.
3. *Improvement of universality of health insurance schemes: identification of a functional mix of Bismarck and Beverige systems.* Based on the EU experiences and practices, mechanisms and instruments for effective mixed models could be adapted in order to improve the universal coverage in SEE countries.
4. *Improvement of public health advocacy in the political arena:* In all SEE countries, the challenge for the schools of public health, national institutes of public health and the public health associations is to act together unisono (via a “*think tank*”). Identification and exploration of strategies and international practices related to this topic would constitute an invaluable research topic for the network.
5. *Reduction of the potential for violence in the transitional societies:* A particular research topic which deserves full attention would be the issue of coping with female trafficking in transitional SEE countries.

6. *Security and preparedness*: Most of SEE countries are unprepared to deal with emergency situations including natural catastrophes and mankind casualties (including ethnic and civil wars). From this point of view, an important research topic to pursue would be the assessment of security and level of preparedness for such calamities in different SEE countries.
7. *Health in mental institutions (including depression and suicide)*: In most of SEE countries, the quality of care provided in mental health institutions is rather poor and, to some extent, ethically questionable. Evidence on the extent and quality of services provided in mental health institutions should be systematically gathered and documented in different SEE countries in order to inform policy.
8. *Lifestyle research*: This topic of research could be explored based on the opportunity of cooperation between Stephan van den Broucke (INTHEALTH) and Wilhelm Kirch (Dresden).
9. *Reintegration capacity for returning migrant workers*: The return of migrants induced by the recent worldwide financial crisis deserves full attention with regard to e.g. migration of health workforce. Jadranka Bozikov (Croatia) might want to take the lead in this research topic.
10. *Directives on cross-border health care*: Based on the ongoing research projects which include also INTHEALTH staff (Kai Michelsen), an appealing research topic for the SEE region would be the development of instructions/guidelines for cross-border health care.
11. *Overproduction and rewarding of sender countries*: A general trend in several SEE countries relates to the overproduction of healthcare workforce, particularly nurses. This process inevitably leads to brain drain to western countries. While the process of free movement of healthcare workforce is difficult to control, attempts should nevertheless be made to establish regulatory mechanisms so as the sender countries (in this case SEE countries) would also be rewarded for the production of such workforce. This research topic should be explored in a timely fashion and guidelines for regulatory and controlling mechanisms should be developed.

*Funding opportunities for the PHR-Net*

- Potential funding for the PHR-Net research activities should be sought mainly in the EU institutions including DG SANCO, FP7 (2008-2013), PHEA, or EUREGIO.

In particular, the PHEA should be considered for two kinds of funding possibilities:

- i. Operating grant for the network, and;
  - ii. The strand on capacity building and political impact.
- Furthermore, UN Agencies (such as UNICEF, or UNDP) should be also approached for funding possibilities.
  - In parallel, attempts to approach different Foundations (e.g. the Open Society Institute) should be made.
  - National governments consist of another valuable funding source, especially for research projects tailored in line with the priorities identified and agreed by the national ministries of science, education and health.
  - The World Bank (through Project Implementation Units near the national Ministries of Health) should also be considered as a potential funding source in different SEE countries.
  - Furthermore, the Gates Foundation (Global Fund) constitutes another potential funding source for several SEE countries.
  - As of a bottom-up approach, a few research projects can be conducted in the framework of Ph.D. programs in different SEE academic institutions. Such an approach would lead to high-quality training of young researchers which are desperately needed in most countries of the SEE region.
  - The University of Maastricht (UM) should try to help with partial funding for some small (but scientifically sound) research projects (e.g. printing of questionnaires, data entry, or expertise with regard to methodological aspects of study designs, sampling, databases and data analysis). A signed agreement between PHR-Net and UM should be considered in the near future.

## APPENDIX 1. AGENDA OF THE MEETING

<i>Day 1: Establishment of the Public Health Research Network (PHR-Net)</i>		
<b>Time</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Responsible person(s)</b>
9:00 – 9:15	Welcome note; description of the agenda	Helmut Brand
9:15 – 9:45	Research projects of the School for Public Health and Primary Care (CAPHRI)	Nanne de Vries
9:45 – 10:00	PHR-Net: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Ad nominem</i> core working group – introduction and description of functions/responsibilities of each member of the core working group</li> <li>• Aim and scope of work of PHR-Net</li> </ul>	Helmut Brand, Ulrich Laaser, Genc Burazeri
10.00 – 10.30	Current research status in the SEE region: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Achievements</li> <li>• Challenges: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Funds</li> <li>○ Expertise</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Genc Burazeri
10:30 – 11:00	Public health research work in Macedonia	Doncho Donev
11:00 – 11:15	Coffee break	-
11:15 – 11:45	Public health research work in Slovenia	Tit Albreht
11:45 – 12:15	Public health research work in Serbia	Vesna Bjegovic
12:15 – 13:15	Lunch break	-
13:15 – 13:45	Public health research work in Bulgaria	Kancho Tchamov
13:45 – 14:15	Public health research work in Romania	Florentina Furtunescu
14:15 – 14:45	Public health research work in Croatia	Jadranka Bozиков
14:45 – 15:15	Public health research work in Albania	Enver Roshi
15:15 – 15:45	Identification of priorities for public health research in SEE countries	Ulrich Laaser, Helmut Brand, Genc Burazeri
15:45 – 16:30	Discussion	All participants

<b>Day 2: Activities planned in the framework of the established PHR-Net</b>		
<b>Time</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Responsible person(s)</b>
9:00 – 9:30	Identification of suitable capacities to conduct research work in SEE countries: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schools of Public Health</li> <li>• Institutes of Public Health</li> <li>• Public Health Associations</li> </ul>	Doncho Donev
9:30 – 10:15	Potential donors and funding opportunities for research work in SEE countries: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• European Union</li> <li>• World Bank</li> <li>• Open Society Institute</li> <li>• Other funding agencies</li> </ul>	Vesna Bjegovic, Stephan van den Broucke
10:15 – 10:45	Identification of suitable research approaches towards the Framework Programme of the European Union: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conditions</li> <li>• Eligible participants</li> <li>• Content of the application form</li> <li>• Deadlines</li> <li>• Contacts</li> <li>• Interests</li> </ul>	Milena Pavlova, Florentina Furtunescu
10:45 – 11:00	Proposal for the first joint survey in SEE counties including high-school children and university students	Genc Burazeri
11:00 – 11:30	Discussion of the technical aspects of the proposed survey	All participants
11:30 – 12:00	Setting the agenda for future activities of PHR-Net: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short term activities (up to the end of 2009)</li> <li>• Mid-term activities</li> </ul>	All participants
12:00 – 12:30	Conclusions of the meeting	All participants
12:30 – 13:30	Lunch	-

## APPENDIX 2. LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

### Core working group

No.	Name	Country	E-mail
1.	Helmut Brand	Maastricht, the Netherlands	Helmut.Brand@INTHEALTH.unimaas.nl
2.	Genc Burazeri	Maastricht, the Netherlands	Genc.Burazeri@INTHEALTH.unimaas.nl
3.	Ulrich Laaser	Bielefeld, Germany	ulrich.laaser@uni-bielefeld.de
4.	Jadranka Bozиков	Zagreb, Croatia	jbozиков@snz.hr
5.	Tit Albreht	Ljubljana, Slovenia	Tit.Albreht@ivz-rs.si
6.	Enver Roshi	Tirana, Albania	roshienvi@yahoo.com
7.	Doncho Donev	Skopje, Macedonia	donevdoncho@gmail.com
8.	Alex Zhekov	Sofia, Bulgaria	alex_bokar@yahoo.com
9.	Kancho Tchamov	Sofia, Bulgaria	tchamov@abv.bg
10.	Florentina Furtunescu	Bucharest, Romania	furtunescu_florentina@yahoo.com
11.	Vesna Bjegovic	Belgrade, Serbia	bjegov@eunet.yu

### Additional contributions (University of Maastricht)

No.	Name	Position/Department	E-mail
1.	Nanne de Vries	Chair of the Scientific Committee, School for Public Health and Primary Care (CAPHRI)	N.devries@gvo.unimaas.nl
2.	Astrid Frissen	Financial manager, CAPHRI	A.Frissen@CAPHRI.unimaas.nl
3.	Milena Pavlova	Assistant Professor, Department of Health Organization, Policy and Economics (BEOZ)	M.Pavlova@BEOZ.unimaas.nl
4.	Kai Michelsen	Researcher, Department of International Health (INTHEALTH)	Kai.Michelsen@INTHEALTH.unimaas.nl
5.	Stephan van den Broucke	Associate Professor, INTHEALTH	S.Vandenbroucke@INTHEALTH.unimaas.nl
6.	Kasia Czabanowska	Assistant Professor, INTHEALTH	Kasia.Czabanowska@INTHEALTH.unimaas.nl
7.	Kristine Sorensen	Researcher, INTHEALTH	K.Sorensen@INTHEALTH.unimaas.nl
8.	Anita Creusen	Secretary, INTHEALTH	Anita.Creusen@INTHEALTH.unimaas.nl