

# Pekka Puska – For a Strong and Competent World Health Organization



**“Countries of the world need a strong WHO for protecting and promoting public health. We need a global organization with a clear understanding of the various factors affecting public health, with the readiness and competence to act both within the Member States and globally, and with credible authority to advocate health at all political and social forums.”**

# Protecting and Promoting Public Health World Wide

**Professor Pekka Puska** is known throughout the world as a pioneer in public health programmes. Currently the Director General of the National Public Health Institute of Finland (KTL) and the Vice President of the International Association of National Public Health Institutes (IANPHI) he has extensive experience in planning and managing broad public health knowledge into effective action at local, national, regional and global levels.

Professor Puska believes that building up strong national and local health services and investing in public health infrastructures in addition to international collaboration are the keys to meeting multiple health challenges. There is a pressing need to integrate health into other policies and to take health fully into account in all societal decision making.

Sound and comprehensive health policies, effective disease control, universal access to primary health care, functioning health services and health promotion matter in every country regardless of differences in living standards, political systems and culture. The availability and training of qualified health care personnel, assurance of gender equality, access to effective medication, introduction of appropriate wireless and other technologies, and effective control of infectious diseases are examples of challenges facing the World Health Organization.



WHO Global Forum, Rio de Janeiro 2003

## Rapidly Changing World Health

WHO's leadership has been crucial in fighting severe infectious disease epidemics and co-ordinating this work globally through effective surveillance and early response. WHO's strong action for global influenza pandemic preparedness is a topical example of this leadership.

Preventing infectious diseases has always been one of the strengths of the WHO, and the efficient control of HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis must be secured and enhanced in all circumstances, with particular focus on the poorest countries.

At the same time we must recognize that world health is changing rapidly. WHO must urgently improve its ability to help countries address the growing problem of non-communicable diseases (NCD). Many countries already struggle under the dual burden of both infectious and chronic diseases. Professor Puska is concerned that new diseases linked to lifestyles and their social determinants, such as cardiovascular diseases and diabetes, will take many countries by surprise especially in conditions of demographic change and rapidly ageing populations.

**“This development challenges all countries – children, women and men – particularly when living standard rises but also when poverty prevents people from making healthy choices. The WHO's ability to support its Member States to meet this challenge is crucial to world health and especially to the health of future generations.”**

## From Scientific Evidence to Global Action

Professor Puska's profound knowledge of societal decision making processes arises from experience in Parliament of Finland and from his many engagements in international health policy making. He holds both a medical doctor's degree with a PhD in public health and a master's degree in political science. Professor Puska's some 500 international scientific publications and several international awards demonstrate his dynamic career.

Professor Puska's scientific, administrative and management experience has been in demand also at the WHO. He has participated in WHO expert consultations in different parts of the world and in multinational research projects since the 1970s. His role was decisive in starting and guiding the European NCD prevention network, CINDI, and he has since worked together with other WHO regions and Member States to launch their networks. He has also taken part in the meetings of WHO's governing bodies and working groups as a delegate of the Finnish Government for many years.

While serving as the Director for Non-communicable Disease Prevention and Health Promotion at the WHO Headquarters in 2001–2003 he started the Global Forum for NCD Prevention to link the regional networks. He also started and has since directed the successful International Quit and Win



Quit and Win in Ghana 2002

– stop smoking programme that involves some one hundred countries in all WHO regions.

Under his leadership the WHO department used an integrated approach in the prevention of NCDs targeting the main risk factors – tobacco, unhealthy diet and physical inactivity – through health promotion, national programmes, policy measures and networks in all WHO regions. Professor Puska’s department also worked on school health and youth health promotion, ageing and life-course, health behaviour surveillance, oral health, and evidence in health promotion.

### Focus on Public Health

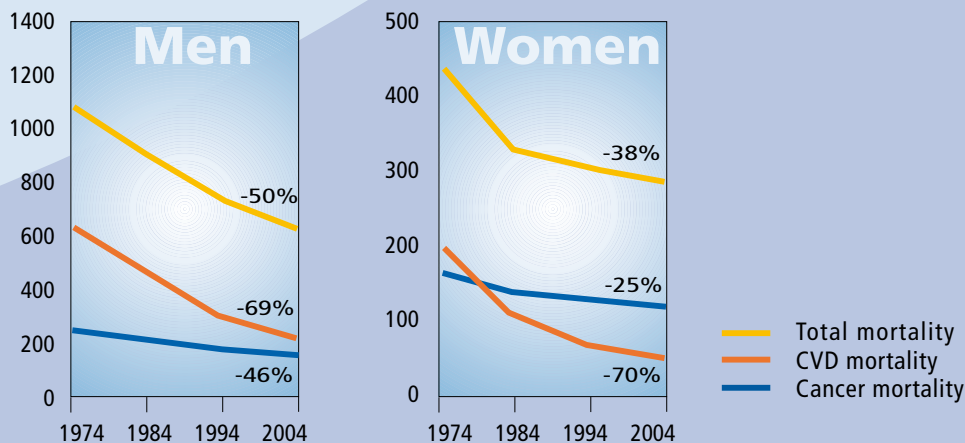
**Professor Puska’s conviction** on the potential of a public health approach is based on his long experience. The lessons originally learned from the pioneering North Karelia Project, led by Professor Puska, have been applied all over the world. The Project showed the power of a population-based prevention and the importance of social determinants of health by resulting in an 80 per cent reduction in cardiovascular disease mortality in three decades in the targeted region.

Professor Puska has served the Finnish National Public Health Institute, KTL, for most of his career



WHO Regional Consultation, New Delhi 2003

and is currently Director General of the institute. He is thus highly experienced in managing a comprehensive agency with some one thousand employees and a mandate resembling that of the WHO at a national level.



Age-Adjusted Mortality Rates in Finland among 35–64-Year-Olds 1974–2004



# Focus on Public Health

The institute is responsible for the control of infectious diseases, outbreak surveillance and vaccinations. In the field of non-communicable diseases, KTL is responsible for national programmes on chronic disease prevention and mental health, accidents, public health nutrition, tobacco control as well as alcohol and drug abuse control. The institute also plays a key role in environmental health and emergency preparedness. KTL's networks and collaboration with scientists, health professionals and policymakers extend to more than one hundred countries all over the world.

Convinced that similar institutes in Member States would contribute greatly to public health, Professor Puska has been active in founding the International Association of National Public Health Institutes (IANPHI). With some 40 members from all WHO regions, IANPHI has placed emphasis on helping developing countries to promote public health through strengthening their institutional public health infrastructure.

**“The value of public health institutes lies in their ability to form a comprehensive picture of national health needs and the policies necessary to meet them and to provide technical assistance to effective programmes. They are also natural collaborators for the WHO”,** says Professor Puska.

## WHO – Collaboration and Leadership

Health is an intrinsic value and central goal in human and social development. At the same time it is an entry point and contributor to overall socio-economic development. The world needs a strong WHO to promote multilateral international work in the field of health. The role of the

United Nation's specialised agencies as partners in development should, however, be further defined and specified.

The role of WHO as a lead agency in international health is unique. Driven by values enshrined in its constitution, based on the UN Charter and recently reaffirmed in the Millennium Declaration, it is capable of mobilizing the best possible expertise from all over the world to support its Member States in improving the health of their citizens, particularly in countries with greatest needs.

**“I am convinced that we can support the Member States more effectively without increasing costs by improving co-operation with all partners active at the field level. However, the role of the WHO in providing expertise on health and setting norms and standards must remain clear in order to maintain the necessary credibility.”**

**“The enthusiasm and expertise of the WHO staff is the future Director General's best asset. By avoiding unnecessary bureaucracy and making the organization accountable and transparent at all levels of governance we can continue to motivate WHO staff to perform its best for the Member States. The WHO staff can feel proud of working for an agency with such a great human mission.”**





## Curriculum vitae

### **Professor Pekka Puska (b. 1945)**

#### **Director General, National Public Health Institute**

- Doctor of Medicine, PhD in epidemiology and public health
- Master of Political Sciences
- Language skills: Finnish, English, Swedish, German
- Married, two children (b. 1992 and 1993)

#### **International Health**

- Director for Non-communicable Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, WHO/HQ, Geneva, 2001–2003
- Director, WHO Collaborating Centre on Community Programmes for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 1985–1999
- Vice President, International Association of National Public Health Institutes, 2006–
- Chairman, Management Committee of the CINDI Programme of WHO/EURO, 1994–2001
- Director, International Quit and Win -programme, 1994–2006
- Visiting scholar, Stanford University, 1983
- Temporary advisor and short-term consultant of WHO on numerous occasions since 1970's
- Government representative in WHO's governing bodies, WHO/ IARC and in numerous WHO's working groups since 1980
- Several assignments and major positions with various international non-governmental organizations, agencies and conferences
- Technical and expert advice to more than 100 countries

#### **National Experience**

- Director General, National Public Health Institute, KTL, 2003–
- Director of Department of Epidemiology and Health Promotion, KTL, 1978–2001
- Principal investigator and Director of the North Karelia Project, 1972–1997
- Member of Finnish National Parliament, 1987–1991
- President, Finnish Heart Association, 2004–
- Chairman, National Nutrition Council, 2005–
- Chairman, UKK Health Promotion Institute, 2005–
- Member of several governmental committees and working groups in the fields of public health and research
- Several assignments and major positions with many Finnish non-governmental organizations

#### **Honours, Awards and Publications**

- WHO Annual Health Education Award, 1990
- International Union for Health Education, European Office, AMIE Award, 1991
- Academician, Russian Academy of Natural Sciences, 1997
- WHO Tobacco Free World Award, 1999
- Honorary Doctor of Science (D.Sc.), University of St. Andrews (Scotland), 1999
- Nordic Public Health Award, 2005
- Some 500 international scientific publications in the fields of public health, epidemiology, disease prevention and health promotion.