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Joseph K. Ogah
University of Northern Iowa

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ONE YEAR AFTER 9/11: THE IMPACT OF GLOBAL TERRORISM ON PUBLIC HEALTH EDUCATION

Joseph K. Ogah, M.A.
University of Northern Iowa

As we mark one year after the September 11 (9/11) attack of the World Trade Center in New York, and the killing or traumatizing of thousands of innocent persons, global terrorism remains an issue of concern for political leaders, the business world and educators. The implications of terrorism to public health education are many and varied. At the minimum, 9/11 increased the immediate need for additional public health education to help people cope and deal with both the immediate and long-term effects of terrorist acts all over the world. Public health education plays a leading role in managing the fear and insecurity created by global terrorism. Through health education people are informed about emergency crisis management procedures. Knowing what to do in the face of a terrorist attack may reduce the negative health impact of global terrorism. For instance, people should be educated on biological agents and chemicals that have the potential for being used as terrorist weapons, and what to do when they are used. Such information is also crucial in imbuing those who handle these agents with the responsibility of preventing the agents from ending up in the hands of potential terrorists.

Though some people may find this farfetched, public health education has an important role in reducing global terrorism. Since terrorists are made and not born, public health education can help reduce the conditions that come together to produce terrorists. This is especially true bearing in mind that there are many motivating factors to global terrorism. For instance, well programmed health education and promotion activities at the work place and in communities can help people manage stress better, and reduce the tendency to lose control and lash out on society. Again, we can create global health education networks that will provide opportunity for children and youth to discuss the relationship between terrorism and health, and how a terrorist act in one part of the world affects people's health in other parts. Furthermore, by researching, documenting, and disseminating information about the long-term health effects of global terrorism we stand the chance of touching people's hearts about how terrorism hurts everyone everywhere.

Both terrorism and the acts to counter it create huge disruptions in their wake that have implications for public health education. Whether it is 9/11 in the US or Operation Anaconda in Afghanistan, suicide bombing in Israel or military raids in Palestine, Pakistani raids or Indian raids in Kashmir; regardless of whether it is aggression or defense, right or wrong, the bottom line is that all these acts kill, maim, traumatize, and scare people. These acts pollute air and water, desecrate land, and destroy homes. These acts create hunger, disease, and misery. These are the issues increasingly being addressed in public health education.

One would assume that taking on additional responsibilities would normally go with an increase in the funding and supply of public health resources and personnel. However, the tendency of nations to seek direct military responses to terrorist attacks may divert resources from public health education. This paradox creates a challenge for leaders in the field of public health education, because they may have to do more with less. It is therefore crucial for leaders in the field to articulate the important role of public health education in global terrorism and the potential benefits of stepping up funding for the field.

Learning by Analogy

By far the most important implication of 9/11 and global terrorism to public health education is “learning by analogy.” Among all global terrorist acts, why is 9/11 very important? Is it the number of people who died, families and persons affected, property damaged, the fear it created, or the mere fact that the USA, the “super power,” was attacked? Of course, the answer is all of the above and more. However, by analogy the threat and effects of disease, malnutrition, hunger, obesity, poverty, poor shelter, ignorance, addiction, premature death worldwide make 9/11 sound like a piece of cake.

Imagine a country with a population twice that of the US, where all the people are women, some pregnant and others have little children. All the women look weak, weary, and hapless. In fact, worldwide 570 million women are suffering from anemia. Is that a threat or what! Imagine a nation of Israel with a population made up of only children. The whole population of Israel, all 6 million of them, starves to death in one year. In fact, worldwide over 11 million children die every year in developing countries alone. Is that a threat or what! At the same time, imagine a country as large as the US and Canada put together, where everybody is obese. Not only are the 300 million obese people of the world at risk for chronic diseases, but they also have to worry about employment discrimination and exclusion from air travel, of course, unless they are prepared to pay extra for extra butt room. Is that a threat or what! What if all the people living in the largest 25 cities of the US, over 40 million of them, are known to be living with HIV/AIDS? In fact, that is the world population currently living with HIV/AIDS. Is that a threat or what! And suppose every year the world gathers in some village in Africa to bury one child in a grave with an epitaph that reads: MALARIA. In fact, that will be only one of the one million children who die from malaria each year. Is that a threat or what!

One year after 9/11, the threat of global terrorism is as real as ever before. But after thousands of years of civilization, the global threat of disease, malnutrition, environmental degradation, pollution, ignorance, poverty and squalor is as pertinent to world security as global terrorism, if not more. Public health education continues to play a significant role in dealing with global terrorism and insecurity. More than ever before, this is the time to strengthen public health education.