

Profile

Richard Deckelbaum: building bridges to better health

Richard Deckelbaum, the current president of the Global Health Education Consortium (GHEC), began thinking about the need for a new kind of doctor as a young physician in Jerusalem and Zambia in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This new doctor would be comfortable practising in underserved communities anywhere in the world, and would help populations, not only patients, by addressing issues beyond the scope of traditional medical education, such as sanitation, clean water, and preventive nutrition.

Deckelbaum soon became this kind of doctor, and has helped foster many more like him. He co-founded the first medical school with a required curriculum in global health integrated into all 4 years of training and specifically created to turn out global health practitioners: the Medical School for International Health (MSIH) at Ben-Gurion University in the Negev, Beersheva, Israel. And as president of GHEC—a non-profit organisation that promotes global health education in medical curricula—he's helped other medical schools to strengthen their own training programmes in global health.

For Deckelbaum, a global health practitioner's role is to "work around the politics" promoting the health of populations while also protecting them. "I don't think populations should be penalised because of politics", he says. Working with Umayyeh Khammash of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, Deckelbaum is studying nutrition in populations of the West Bank and Gaza Strip; as part of this work he makes field visits to restricted areas and holds conferences on nutrition so that international experts can share knowledge with their Palestinian colleagues. "No one is dictating the agenda, the interest is definitely there for both of us, and I should say that he does this on a voluntary basis", says Khammash. "I'm sure that this is a model that can be seen by others as a model for working together, building peace together."

As a medical student at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, Deckelbaum's desire to see "health from the non-ivory tower point of view" led him to clerkships in Greece and Newfoundland. His plan to join the Zambia Flying Doctor Service after his internship was postponed when he met his future wife, Kaya Rosenberg, and followed the romance to Jerusalem, taking a job with Hadassah Hospital. In 1969, the couple travelled to Zambia, where Deckelbaum started working with the Flying Doctors. Visiting inpatients, he was horrified by the griminess of their bedsheets, until he realised that they preferred to lie on the earthen floor of the ward and had only been getting into the beds when the doctor arrived for morning rounds. This experience, he says, "was a sentinel point in making me realise that you've got to understand the background and the culture of the population that you're working with".

After Zambia, Deckelbaum returned to Jerusalem in the early 1970s, where he helped open the first children's hospital on the West Bank, in Ramallah. He worked closely with Israeli and Palestinian physicians to coordinate medical services, bring in supplies, and establish systems and clinical protocols. The collaboration required being "extremely sensitive and extremely respectful to both sides", he says.

Despite wanting to get outside the ivory tower, Deckelbaum also knew he wanted to be an academic. In 1973, he went to Boston to do research in biophysics and gastroenterology at Boston University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, studying the physics of lipid-protein systems and inter-relationships in cholesterol and bile salt metabolism. It was here, he jokes, that he became "the world's leading and only paediatric X-ray diffractionist". Deckelbaum continues to do basic research on the cell biology of lipids and on human nutrition and translate this research to population health, addressing malnutrition and overnutrition in children. And since 1992, he has directed the Institute of Human Nutrition at Columbia University Medical Center, New York.

At Columbia, Deckelbaum began a collaboration with Carmi Margolis, from Ben-Gurion University, to found MSIH in 1996. The school graduated its first class in 2002. MSIH students spend the first 3 years studying agriculture and health, disaster relief, traditional Chinese medicine, and other aspects of global health. Students also complete a clinical clerkship in Ethiopia, Kenya, India, Peru, Nepal, or Israel. "It's thriving and producing health-care leaders for the world", says Marion Greenup, a former colleague of Deckelbaum's at Columbia who is now with the Simons Foundation in New York City. Greenup recalls a trip with Deckelbaum to Moi University Hospital in El doret, western Kenya, where he wanted to boost a clerkship programme for MSIH with Kenyan medical students. The programme's leading mentor wasn't too keen. But later, as Deckelbaum visited wards of AIDS patients "with great care, talking to people and listening", he came on board, and Moi University continues to work with MSIH today. "It wasn't because he did anything super", Greenup says of Deckelbaum. "He was just himself."

Colleagues say Deckelbaum's commitment to open collaboration, his empathy, and perseverance have allowed him to succeed where many others would have failed. According to Deckelbaum, "You've got to form partnerships with the people that you're working with. You don't really work with the top-down approach. Individuals in the community have to be involved in all aspects of what you're trying to achieve—they have to help set the priorities with you."

Anne Harding
anne_harding@yahoo.com

