

Superheroes needed to tackle timebomb of public health challenges

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Public health 'superheroes' are needed to help tackle the growing challenges posed by obesity, alcohol, smoking and other public health threats, according to new research published today.

The research, an [international collaboration](#) from the Universities of Leeds, Alberta and Wisconsin, calls for government and policy makers to recognise the role that [public health leaders](#) can play in addressing these significant health challenges.

It suggests that potential public health 'superheroes' can come from both within public health disciplines, and perhaps more importantly, from outside the profession. However, the research also questions the ability of current public health professionals to lead and influence policy. Instead, it voices concerns about the "corporatisation" of public health in compromising leaders' abilities to speak out as independent advocates for the health of the public.

The results are published today in the medical journal, *Lancet*.

One of the lead authors of the research, Professor Darren Shickle, head of the Academic Unit of Public Health at the University of Leeds, said: "Public health as a specialty has been stifled by re-organisation and it is critical that both current and new professionals have help in becoming more effective leaders. You only have to look at the role that Jamie Oliver has played as someone who has the ability to engage, inspire and make a difference. But we need to act now to ensure public health

leaders at all levels have the skills, resilience and influence to address the public health challenges of today and the future."

[World Health Organisation](#) data reveals the extent of the challenge, indicating that that worldwide obesity has more than doubled since 1980 and that the harmful use of alcohol results in 2.5 million deaths each year. Tobacco kills nearly 6 million people each year and according to the Department of Health, smoking accounts for over 100,000 deaths every year in the UK alone.

Professor Tom Oliver, from the University of Wisconsin, added: "We must ensure that leaders across many sectors of society understand the causes and consequences of these major threats to health and well-being. More importantly, we must develop leaders who can translate that understanding into political support for evidence-based responses to those threats. The most effective leaders combine systematic analysis of problems and potential solutions, and have an ability to recruit partners and champions for new policies and practices."

Across the UK, local governments are preparing to take on a wider remit for public health from April 2013, with new duties to improve the health of their communities. Professor Shickle believes this transference of public health functions to local authorities presents significant challenges but there are also opportunities for both developing current leaders and recruiting new 'superheroes'.

He said: "The new public health system is moving forwards rapidly now, opening up doors to a growing number of effective leaders who can occupy key positions and intervene at all levels to bring about radical changes in social attitudes and behaviour. Challenges posed by obesity and alcohol alone represent a ticking timebomb, with huge implications for health budgets, but effective public health leaders can play a central role in driving this change."

Commenting on current levels of public health leadership training across the world, Professor Ken Zakariassen, from the University of Alberta, added: "Many public health leadership programmes are responding with much more sophisticated training to prepare leaders. However, this research has identified that public health training varies internationally, and considerably more effort is required to develop the higher levels of leadership."

More information: Comment piece, "Time for heroes: public health leadership in the 21st century", will be published in Lancet on Friday 5 October: [www.thelancet.com/journals/lan ... \(12\)61604-3/abstract](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lan... (12)61604-3/abstract)

Provided by University of Leeds

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