Public health priorities in Sweden
A policy that defines public health priorities in Sweden

Sweden has one of the highest life expectancies in the world, something which is reflected in its national public health policy bill (see sidebar). The bill is one of the few in the world that is based on the determinants of health in the population across 11 objective domains, encompassing the entire lifespan with the goal of providing the collective possibility of long and continually healthy lives for its citizens. The national public health policy bill also highlights the importance of other sectors’ role for health, where “health in all policies” is seen as essential for good population health. Research, policy, and practice function in partnership as part of a whole government approach to providing citizens with the right conditions to make easy choices for their own good health.

The renewed national public health policy bill (2007/08/110) particularly recognizes the challenges of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and priorities are on objective domains 3, 6, 9–11 (see bold text in sidebar). The Swedish Government has also approved a five-year national action plan (bill 2010/11:47) on alcohol, illicit drugs, doping and tobacco. The Swedish National Institute of Public Health is assigned by the Government to support implementation of the action plan at local and regional levels by doing various tasks.

The increase in Swedish life expectancy over the past decades is due mainly to decreased mortality from non-communicable coronary and respiratory diseases, and recent policies such as the ban on smoking in public places and initiatives to counteract physical inactivity aim to maintain this trend. On the other hand, while current statistics show that previous increases in the number of overweight and obese persons have now tapered off in the population, they have stabilized at historically high levels, especially among adults. Unless more intensive preventive measures are taken now, the risk for future negative health trends are likely to be seen since every second child today is growing up with a parent that is either overweight or obese.
A national public health agency to support and monitor progress

The Swedish National Institute of Public Health monitors the progress of the national public health policy bill, as well as provides knowledge and supports implementation of interventions against NCDs, in particular, with a focus on health promotion and disease prevention, at national, regional, and local levels. To effectively provide these services, the Swedish National Institute of Public Health performs three main tasks:

- Monitoring public health trends and evaluating the progress of the national public health policy in relation to a broad number of indicators for determinants of health for each objective domain.
- Developing and disseminating public health programs and strategies across all sectors.
- Exercising supervision regarding legislation and regulatory policies of alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs.

In practical terms, the Swedish National Institute of Public Health maintains close ties with the research community, policy makers and public health practitioners with the aim to increase cross-talk between these groups and translate knowledge into practice. Providing the government with an information base from these arenas then allows decision makers to create policy for continued development of effective public health policies in Sweden, aimed at both the structural level as well as individuals’ own decision-making processes that determine health outcomes.
Partnership in putting knowledge into practice

Measures to reduce the burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are of high priority in Sweden. The Swedish National Institute of Public Health has estimated the cost of illness to society in Sweden to be at least SEK 120 billion per year, while the cost of tobacco use, alcohol consumption, physical inactivity and unhealthy eating habits is estimated at SEK 55 billion per year (Public Health Policy Report 2010, Swedish National Institute of Public Health).

National guidelines for illness prevention methods

The role of health and medical care in preventing diseases is also a main priority in Swedish public health work. The National Board of Health and Welfare prepares national guidelines for how medical care can achieve this by supporting patients’ lifestyle changes regarding use of tobacco and alcohol, increasing physical activity and reducing unhealthy food habits. The national guidelines are targeted towards adults and in some cases special groups such as pregnant and breastfeeding women, and individuals that have planned surgery.

Ongoing programs and initiatives

The following is a short list of selected ongoing programs and initiatives where the Swedish National Institute of Public Health has an active role:

- **The “Physical Activity in the Treatment and Prevention of Disease” manual.** This first-of-its-kind manual, covering most areas of disease where physical activity has a documented effect, is produced and distributed by the Swedish National Institute of Public Health and the Professional Associations for Physical Activity. The manual combines recommendations on suitable physical exercise activities with a description of the potential risks of physical activity for various patient groups, making the handbook suitable for use by medical personnel or by anyone working with physical activity and health. The manual itself and more information can be found at www.fyss.se/fyss-in-english.

- **The Physical Activity on Prescription® program.** As the name suggests, individually-tailored doses of physical activity are prescribed just like medication by trained medical personnel, and treatment effects are
followed-up. The Swedish National Institute of Public Health provides knowledge and method support to the county-based health care systems that perform the prescribing, and hundreds of registered, local volunteer organizations and business enterprises provide the arenas to help the patient with their prescribed activity. In 2010, 35,000 prescriptions were written out in Sweden.

• "A Healthier Sweden" campaign week. One of the largest of its kind in Europe, over 3,000 events took place across Sweden in 2011 during the second annual edition of a week-long campaign to raise awareness about healthy food habits and physical activity. As assigned by the government, the Swedish National Institute of Public Health mobilized and coordinated private, volunteer, and local organizations’ events by compiling a searchable event website, providing local press support and promotional material, and helped to build longer-term networks to ensure that activities continued even after the week was over.

• The national strategy on parental support program. One of the most comprehensive government initiatives targeted towards healthy parent and family environments, this is a universally available intervention to improve children’s health and development, and offer protection against social problems. The Swedish National Institute of Public Health coordinates the implementation of this strategy based on scientific evidence. Through targeted funding in the Swedish National Institute of Public
Health facilitates a unique partnership between municipalities and research groups to follow-up the implementation process and results from each applied program. “Early intervention” through parental support may be one of the most cost-effective initiatives a society can take.

• **Health ageing program** is coordinated by the Swedish National Institute of Public Health with the aim to promote health in the aging population by coaching young senior citizens aged 60 and 75 years who suffer from at least two of following symptoms: type-two diabetes, increased blood pressure, mild depression or overweight. The aim of this program is to provide coaching that empowers senior citizens to modify their lifestyle, in particular physical activity and health diets. The program is operated with a multi-sector approach that enables collaboration and partnership of researchers, primary health care centers in the county council and professionals in the local municipalities. The local municipality and the voluntary sector provide social meeting places and organized social activities that enable senior citizens to participate in social activities.

• **The Responsible Beverage Service program.** Working groups consisting of restaurant and pub owners, the Swedish National Institute of Public Health, municipal supervision authorities, and local police aim to reduce drunkenness and violence in establishments that serve alcohol through training of service staff. The program has been shown to save 39 Swedish crowns for every crown spent on implementing the program. More information can be found at: www.fhi.se/en/Highlights/Responsible-Beverage-Service/.

• **Restaurants against illicit drugs.** This national network of restaurant owners and public agencies works to maintain a drug-free restaurant and pub environment. Through promoting anti-drug policy, media support, educating service personnel, developing the physical environment of the establishment and maintaining good relations with police, this method has shown success in reducing narcotics use in the service sector.

• **Motivational Interviewing (MI) manual and study guide for care personnel.** The goal of the MI technique is to increase the individual’s will to change their habits in a self-dependent way. The technique places special
demands on the interviewer’s abilities. Therefore the Swedish National Institute of Public Health together with practitioners have developed practical guides to help school and care personnel discuss choices concerning tobacco use, alcohol consumption, food choices and physical activity with students, patients, and other groups.

- **Municipal basic facts database and the “Open comparisons” report.** This is a searchable, user-friendly statistical database containing current and trend series data on a number of health indicators in county councils, municipalities and suburbs of larger urban areas. The health indicators are presented based on the eleven domains of the Swedish national public health policy. The database can be organized into age-group and gender, and allows comparison to both local, regional and national averages. This gives community politicians and decision makers the opportunity to follow-up their own health efforts in real terms, as well as be able to prioritize resources for interventions. And a little “healthy” competition between neighbouring communities to see who has the best statistics can be particularly motivating!

- **The national tobacco prevention program.** To reach the national goals for tobacco reduction in 2014, the Swedish National Institute of Public Health provides national coordination and support to local prevention work, as well as improved supervision methods and expanded smoking cessation efforts. The program includes methods such as promoting tobacco-free periods prior to surgery, tobacco-free schoolyards, and supervision to prevent underage access to tobacco at retail outlets.

- **School Food Sweden.** This is a globally unique national web-based system that allows all primary schools and municipalities to evaluate the school meals they provide. The system also provides national data for agencies and researchers to investigate the associations between school meal quality, students’ consumption habits, diet, health and academic achievement and the potential to reduce health inequalities with regard to socio-economic status and gender. More information can be found at http://www.skolmatsverige.se/skolmatsverige-english.
• Manuals on the built environments’ effects on physical activity. Additionally the Swedish National Institute of Public Health collaborates with technical higher-education institutions with the aim to conduct training for architects in skills related to creating built environments that promote physical activity and good health. The Swedish National Institute of Public Health coordinates networks of architects, city planners and public health practitioners with the aim of highlighting the fact that people’s health depend on how we plan and build, and provides checklists and manuals to municipalities that promote this focus. Good examples are presented through case studies and experiences from planning professionals.

The Swedish National Institute of Public Health
develops and conveys knowledge for better health.
I hope you will find the Swedish experiences useful
for your initiatives to promote public health.

Dr Sarah Wamala, Director-General