

As a young man in the Navy, my grandfather made an interesting observation about smoking. Specifically, he realized that the men who smoked got smoking breaks while the non-smokers kept working, so it wasn't long before he too enjoyed some extra leisure time throughout the day. Less than fifty years later, my grandfather became part of a shocking statistic: tobacco has killed more members of our armed forces than all of the wars in United States history combined.

When thinking of public health, the efforts to reduce tobacco use might come to mind as an example, and tobacco use reduction is indeed among the greatest public health victories in recent history. But on another timeframe, a different picture emerges: the 30-year increase in life expectancy in the US between 1890 and 1990 can be attributed in large part to improved sanitation, infrastructure, and vaccination. Internationally, yet another face of public health comes to light. Last year, Indian prime minister Narendra Modi was elected on a campaign platform that included a promise to address the country's severe lack of toilets. As these examples illustrate, health impacts are woven into the fabric of every level of our lives, from individual choices like smoking to policies such as those that ensure sanitary living conditions. At each of these levels, there are public health professionals working to make health a more salient consideration for decision-making in order to promote the physical, emotional, and social well-being of all.

Recently, the Ebola epidemic has reminded us of the paramount importance of public health. Perhaps the most immediate lesson is in the consequences of inadequate healthcare facilities and workers to care for the sick and prevent the virus from spreading. The outbreak has also pushed people, especially in the US and Europe, to consider how globalization has changed the nature of health, for what might have been contained to a single country or continent not long ago is now a concern for everyone.

As much as we stand to learn from the appearance of Ebola, we might learn even more from its disappearance. Already, the epidemic has been pushed out of the spotlight in the news, and with it, perhaps a great deal of the concern for improved public health. Similarly, health priorities at the national, community, and individual level are often ephemeral. When tragedy strikes, as it did internationally with Ebola, it causes us to pause to consider what is truly important. At the individual level too, traumatic events, like the loss of a loved one, force us to wonder why we had ever let health fade from our consciousness.

Although public health concerns may not always capture headlines, they are ever-present and ever-deserving of everyone's time and effort. It is easy, especially living in an industrialized country, to take for granted public health resources from clean water to emergency medical services. And while we have come a long way from the time of workplace policies that encourage smoking, we have yet to make significant progress in addressing newer public health challenges like obesity, which threatens longevity and overall quality of life just as tobacco use did in my grandfather's generation. The Ebola epidemic should remind us that the cyclical rising and falling of attention to public health is insufficient to sustain the gains in life expectancy and health-related quality of life that we have seen over the past century. Public health is dependent not only on public health professionals, but on all people, from grandchildren to presidents, making a commitment to sustained health consciousness and promotion. There is no need to wait for another headline-making reminder.

