

EDITORIAL

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As we celebrate 20 years of MAPHM, we have asked some of our members, all experts in their respective fields, to reflect upon the main public health issues facing Malta and the added value of a vibrant public health community that has shaped the development of health and health systems in Malta during this period. We were overwhelmed by the positive response and interest that our proposed special issue elicited. The result is an overview of public health in Malta encompassing simultaneously a unique collection of historical processes and events made available in the public domain for the first time, together with the evidence-base needed to address the key challenges foreseen in the coming years.

For starters, the President and Secretary of MAPHM reflect on the key contribution that the association has made since its establishment in 1999.

In the first article, England and Buttigieg set the context within which the health system operates presently in Malta by documenting how population growth, ageing, changing fertility patterns and net immigration within the working age group have characterised the demographic transformation in Malta. Grech et. al. trace the main developments that have taken place in the health services in Malta partly triggered by Malta's accession to the European Union and digitalisation. Gatt and Distefano document the development of health information systems in Malta from their inception in the early 1980s to the current situation where Malta proudly maintains ten population-based Health Registers and a five yearly National Health Interview Survey.

Calleja and Podesta model linear projections of health care demands using adjusted population projections by age-group and gender until 2030. Their analysis reveals how significant policy and infrastructure responses are likely to be required to increase capacity of the primary health sector as well as to address bed shortages as a result of the ageing native population and a mass inflow of foreign workers.

Agius-Muscat et. al. chronicle the most important advances that have taken place in the fields of healthcare computing, eHealth and Digital Health in the Maltese Islands since 1999 demonstrating how public health physicians have been at the forefront of advances in Health IT, often acting as human interfaces between the medical and technological worlds.

Camilleri et. al. give a detailed historical analysis of the development of public mental health policy in Malta. This intimate eye-witness account is particularly timely as Malta embarks on a renewed national attempt to develop policies and strategies that need to be translated into resources and action that reap sustained improvement in population mental health and well-being for future generations.

Cardona & Debono describe the implemented of several measures to improve environmental health including legislation related to air quality, noise pollution, water and sanitation, waste management, chemicals, and electrification of the transport sector as well as strategies and policies for the promotion of active mobility such as cycling and building sustainable health system. They call for increased attention to be given to climate change which is expected to impact significantly on health and well-being in Malta given the island's geography and topography.

Borg et. al. describe how over the past five years Malta, like other countries in Europe has seen an increase in various infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, HIV, other STIs, vector borne diseases as well as outbreaks of vaccine preventable diseases notably measles. Xuereb et. al. describe the three national cancer screening programmes for breast, colorectal and cervical cancer. They discuss the challenges involved in setting up these programmes and how despite improvements in recent years, low participation rates remain a challenge.

Gauci et. al. list the strategies and measures that have been driven by public health practitioners in an attempt to address the challenges posed from unhealthy nutrition which is leading to a significant burden of disease in Malta. Baluci gives a historical overview of the myriad legislative measures that have been implemented to tackle tobacco in Malta whilst showing that in spite of decreased smoking prevalence, there remain outstanding challenges that require our attention.

In the final article of this special issue, Vincenti et. al. give a detailed account of the development of structured postgraduate training in public health medicine in Malta highlighting how public health medicine was the first specialty to have a structured programme of training established. They conclude that succession planning is crucial for the preservation of a wealth of hard-earned invaluable experience, knowledge and expertise in the speciality.

We trust that our contribution serves to shine a light on the successes, failures and ongoing challenges for health in Malta. We sincerely hope that it will inspire policy-makers, fellow health professionals and civil society to come together and work towards addressing the outstanding and emerging health challenges whilst retaining all that has worked well in order to ensure that all persons in Malta regardless of age, gender and socio-economic status are in a position to enjoy good health and wellbeing throughout their life.