

Sian Griffiths was mulling both the intricacies of integrated Chinese and western medicine and the qualities of good fish soup when we met one Friday afternoon.

Neither are your standard public health topics but then Professor Griffiths did not take up her position as the Director of the School of Public Health and also Chairman of the Department of Community and Family Medicine at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) to teach standard public health.

She came to bring the 'New Public Health'—the kind where everybody who has an effect on the health and wellbeing of the community is recognised and involved.

To illustrate her point, Professor Griffiths said that there are three films every medical student should see 'An Inconvenient Truth', 'Supersize Me', and 'Sicko'.

"If you take these three movies you cover the big issues that are affecting health now—climate change, obesity and lifestyle disease and health systems—where they fail, where they succeed."

"And these show how we can use different media to get our messages across."

When we met, Professor Griffiths had just completed two years in what is not only a political minefield of a job but also one with the potential to transform how medicine is practised in our region.

Getting students to look beyond formulae and protocols is just the beginning. "One of the things that is depressing is the narrow nature of medical education. Public health is all around us. SARS, 9/11, bioterrorism: all have public health implications. Social economic and environmental factors are all intrinsically linked to our health—the social determinants of health need to be understood."

When asked why come to Hong Kong—after all as the youngest ever president of the UK Faculty of Public Health of the Royal College of Physicians, the former Chair of the Association for Public Health and a senior lecturer in the Department of Public Health and Primary Care at Oxford University, to name just a few of her distinguished achievements and appointments, Professor Griffiths had plenty of choice. Her response, that it was the right time, brings to mind that of the late Sir Edmund Hillary when asked why climb Mt Everest: "Because it was there".

After co-chairing the expert committee of inquiry into the handling of the SARS epidemic in Hong Kong, which found our public health system wanting, Professor Griffiths must have known she was indeed choosing a task of Himalayan proportions.

And when, in 2006, she agreed to also chair the Chinese University's Department of Community and Family Medicine in order to find ways to take 'primary care' from a fashionable buzzword to a working reality, Professor Griffiths must have realised she had set her



Professor Sian Griffiths at the 1st Asia-Pacific Conference on Healthy Universities in March 2007

feet on the path to Everest base camp.

Has she achieved change? Professor Griffiths says it is too early to talk about major change. But we were sitting talking in the first and only building in Hong Kong dedicated as a school of public health and we were talking about a myriad of new courses, new approaches, new teachers and new international- and mainland-based resources that Professor Griffiths has been able to bring with her.

"CUHK wanted to raise the profile of public health and we have been able to create a new institution. It's a challenging and creative environment. I'm particularly interested in the potential links with the mainland, which is why we do what we do. Multidisciplinarity: that is the objective."

"We've modelled our framework on the three domains of public health practice—health improvement, health services and health protection underpinned by a grounding in epidemiology and biostatistics as well as law and ethics."

Along with an expanded list of postgraduate degrees, ranging from the standard MPH, to PhDs and MPhil in public health and social medicine, and an MSc in gerontology they have added an MBA programme in health care and a double degree MBA/MPH option.

Even more interesting are plans to develop an undergraduate public health degree. "We are already offering it as a minor and we are attracting quality students." And it is here that the true revolution in public health will take place because in future public health graduates will not all start out in life as doctors.

But Professor Griffiths sees it as evolution not revolution saying, "We need public health doctors but we don't just need doctors."

"We need people with public health skills."

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