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## Commentary II

### Defending the vision of public health

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These thoughts of Jonathan Mann are striking. Bold and direct, as if he were talking to a circle of friends and colleagues, off the cuff, eager to take up issues that most other people would gladly avoid for their potential for controversy. Jonathan Mann must have been a man not easily deterred by controversy, or by the sheer enormity of some of the issues he regarded as important in public health, even when, as it is often the case during the interview, he had no answers to offer, only uncertainties. He could have easily stepped on safer ground, but, instead, his words are so closely packed with the appeal of uncertainties that often he seems to enjoy the situation and to be waiting for the discussion to flare up and disagreements to pour in.

I knew Jonathan Mann only as a colleague – I attended many conferences in which he was a speaker, but we worked in different fields. Reading his words, I realise how tough and courageous he must have been. Indeed, it takes a healthy dose of courage for a public person, as he was, to talk about issues such as those he lays open on the table. He does not hesitate, for example, to state bluntly that public health is at risk of losing contact with meaning. In our fascination with new tools and new measurements, the fundamental reasons justifying why we are using such tools and measurements are easily forgotten. We become more and more entranced with the technical aspects of our job, much in the same vein as the clinical medicine's experience, which was what led many of us to prefer the care of communities instead of that of individuals.

There is not an ounce of pessimism, or negativism, in Jonathan Mann's words. Rather, he cautions us against the dangers of spreading reductionism in Public Health. It is easy to forget that our mission is the public's health, not just the development of a novel genetic marker per se, or a clever way to analyse research data, or to compare two modalities of administering a vaccine. Given the pressure that most of

us face in our professional lives, it is understandable, of course, that one prefers to forget the larger picture and concentrate on cultivating one's little plot. Unfortunately, by losing contact with the meaning, by avoiding global thinking, what we miss is also the fun of it – the excitement, fulfillment, and, why not, beauty that one derives from working in public health.

For Jonathan Mann, health was the end result of a complexity of factors, which prominently include the protection of human dignity, the creation of conditions in which people can make choices for themselves, the protection and cultural viability of communities. His perspective was much broader than just sanitation, preventive interventions or screenings. Public health as the construction of the complex of conditions that contribute to making people healthy, but also the need to think in terms of community and the ethical obligation for those of us who are its operators never to abandon the linkage to our communities, even when, as it happens often, there is no answer to their desperation and no prospect to redress their social or structural ills. These are powerful concepts that should inform our work as guiding principles for action in public health.

When this interview took place, the protection of individual rights was still gaining momentum and was a winning proposition worldwide, sustained by a broad range of sweeping political changes. There was a tangible feeling at that time that improvements in human rights, in the sense that Jonathan Mann advocated, will have soon resulted in lasting benefits for the health of humanity. Seven years later that climate has by and large dissolved, in part as a consequence of the tragic events of September 2001. The priorities of most governments, at least those that play the most influential roles in the global scene, have moved elsewhere, to security and the fight against international terrorism. The movement for the protection of human rights is forced on the defensive

while facing attacks on all fronts. Is there room to take up the health of Chechen families, the rapid spread of AIDS to rural China and India, the disgracefully short life of Uzbek and Sudanese farmers, the effects of the continuous violence in the Middle East or Colombia, or the scourge of drugs in inner city USA as major public health topics? Would governments, politicians, or the media pay any attention to the concepts that lie at the core of Jonathan Mann's vision for public health? It is hard to believe that they would, at least

in the present circumstances. However, we, as public health operators, should look at the long perspective and hold firm on Jonathan Mann's principles and defend his vision. If we let go and sink deeper into the easy way of measurements and tools, we will have failed in the essential mission of our profession.

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