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## A legend passes

December brought the sad news that Dr. Halfdan Mahler, the World Health Organization's (WHO) Director-General from 1973 to 1988 had passed away. He had his difficulties in coping with the global HIV pandemic when it surfaced in the mid 1980s (echoes of the struggles the organization had with Ebola in recent times), but it was his initiative that led to what I think must still be the most quoted health conference of all time, the historic Alma Ata (now Almaty) conference in Kazakhstan back in 1978. It formally launched 'Health for All by 2000' and firmly identified Primary Health Care (PHC) as the way forward. Indeed it was probably an important influence on the first publisher of this journal, who launched *Africa Health* a couple of months later.

Alas for Africa, much of the legacy was in the slogan. There wasn't enough understanding of what it takes to drive fundamental change within health systems dominated by doctors intent on curing disease, rather than preventing the disease in the first place. The 'movement' also foundered on the global economic malaise in the decade that followed with much of Africa in economic reverse, trussed by international loans delivered with conditionality of social sector emaciation. Two years ago I recall an emotional appearance from Dr. Mahler to endorse Universal Health Care (UHC) as a strategy at the World Health Assembly. It was as if Health for All was being relaunched.

But there are differences. UHC seeks to ensure all people obtain health services without suffering financial hardship when paying for them, while Mahler himself clarified his vision as: 'Health for All implies the removal of the obstacles

to health – that is to say, the elimination of malnutrition, ignorance, contaminated drinking water, and unhygienic housing – quite as much as it does the solution of purely medical problems such as a lack of doctors, hospital beds, drugs and vaccines'. His vision wasn't shared by all. Sadly the major financiers of health took a different view. The United Nations Development Programme garnered support of the World Bank and Unicef to launch a series of vertical programmes to eliminate specific diseases rather than joining Mahler's vision. It was as if there was a counter-revolution against the maestro's vision.

And so we moved from PHC to UHC, (with a few interloping initiatives in between) and who knows what will be next. I was a great proponent of PHC at launch, but in time came to realise how it struggles as a concept, unless everyone in the health team embraces it and puts it at the centre. Few did, so funds were not forthcoming. On UHC I remain a sceptic. Traditional health insurance schemes are too inefficient to garner user confidence, and informal sector engagement is always going to be a struggle.

RIP Dr. M. Your vision embraced humanity. And thank you for also being press friendly! You were the last DG of WHO who one could access easily for comment or opinion!



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