

Health diplomacy: Rx for peace

A recent poll by the Pew Foundation indicates a new trend in how Americans view the merits of military engagement.

That survey of Americans' political and social values reveals that belief in the effectiveness of military power as a foreign policy tool has dropped to the lowest point in the last 20 years, with only 49 percent of those polled believing military strength is the best way to achieve peace.

This diminished confidence in military intervention as a cornerstone of international relations raises an obvious question: What other tools are available to advance U.S. interests in the world? Health diplomacy is an important and underutilized instrument in our nation's foreign-policy toolbox. It can be a powerful playing field for diplomacy—one organized around the possibility of sharing knowledge, tools and other resources to improve global health.

Just as diplomats have hammered out treaties over the centuries to build bridges between once-warring nations, public health officials and humanitarian organizations have begun sharing best practices and technology in an effort to build a new kind of bridge between countries to foster peace and development around the world.

Americans have only recently returned to recognizing improved global health, in terms of preventing and treating both infectious and chronic diseases, must be a policy priority. This is partly because infectious disease is a threat the United States thought it had left behind long ago. The triumph of public health interventions in the 20th century led then Surgeon General Dr. William H. Stewart to announce in 1967 that it was time for the United States to "close the book on infectious disease" and turn its attention to chronic diseases like cancer. Smallpox was nearly eradicated, AIDS was an undreamed-of threat, and we were not thinking globally.

However, history has shown

us Dr. Stewart's statement was premature—it turned out to be a medical mirage. In fact, since his declaration, more than 32 new diseases have emerged, including AIDS, Ebola, Lyme's Disease, West Nile Encephalitis, SARS and H5N1 avian flu.

A report released last week by the World Health Organization (WHO) found new diseases are emerging at a "historically unprecedented" rate of one per year. In the last five years alone, WHO has documented more than 1,100 epidemics including bird flu, polio and cholera.

Today's three leading infectious diseases, HIV/AIDS, malaria, and TB, together are responsible for 6 million deaths each year. Yet, it wasn't until the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, followed by the anthrax attacks against our nation that many Americans realized infectious diseases remain a major threat to U.S. security.

But in the 21st century, infectious disease is not the only health concern nations must address. With the spread of tobacco use, obesity and other health-damaging behaviors, 60 percent of deaths worldwide are due to chronic illnesses including heart and lung disease, cancer, stroke and diabetes. In the United States, 7 in 10 deaths yearly are attributable to these conditions. Also, the safety of our food, water supply and the environment do not respect national borders.

Why, then, with so many deaths and such an impact on every nation's economy and national security, has such limited attention been paid to health threats diplomatically?

First, disease in the developing world is often not granted the focus it merits largely because it is viewed as a problem "over there." More than 63 percent of the people infected with HIV live

in Africa; 79 percent of the chronic disease burden is in the developing world. Whether "over there" is Africa, Southeast Asia or Latin America, inhabitants of the United States for far too long have seen little reason to worry. But Americans—and the world—have much to gain from increasing our focus on global health.

Health diplomacy is a means of self-preservation in an increasingly interconnected global community. SARS, H5N1 avian influenza, AIDS, TB—the list goes on and on—are only a jet plane away from America's shores. But just as diseases can cross borders easily today, so can solutions. Globalization facilitates the rapid response to health problems between rich and poor nations by quick mo-

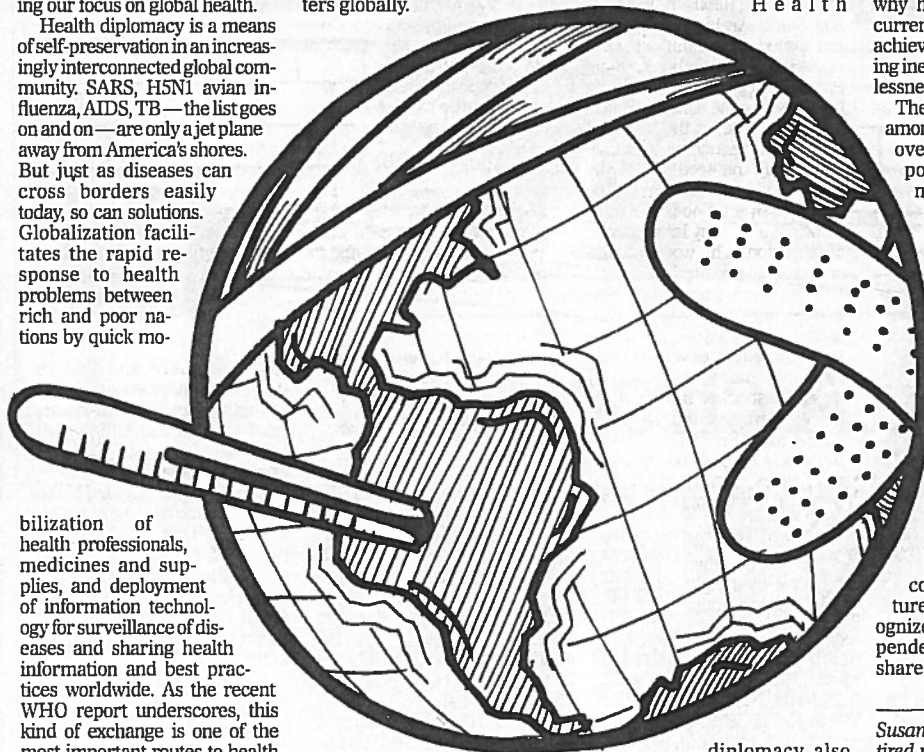
bilization of health professionals, medicines and supplies, and deployment of information technology for surveillance of diseases and sharing health information and best practices worldwide. As the recent WHO report underscores, this kind of exchange is one of the most important routes to health security.

The tools of health diplomacy also can increase the so-called "smart power" of the United States abroad. The United States spent \$571.6 billion on defense last year alone, but spends only 0.14 percent of its gross national product on global health and development, the least of any major industrialized nation. We must devote more of

our nation's resources to improving global health—not just to repair damage caused by natural disasters and war, but to "win the hearts and minds" of people around the world by helping prevent the social and political discord that results from diseases and disasters globally.

Were America to marshal fully its medical expertise, financial support and compassionate leadership to fight infectious and chronic diseases, just think what effect this would have on international opinion and on improving health and hope for people around the world.

Health



diplomacy also offers a much-needed opportunity for building bridges between the governments of the world and the private sector, synergizing efforts of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), allowing them to work together to improve public health.

Building such links between nations can facilitate communications in other areas, increasing

trust and confidence and helping improve overall relations. Countries cannot achieve political stability or flourish economically with unhealthy people, and when average life expectancy is 38. Lasting peace is impossible where there are extreme disparities in health and wealth. That is why health can be a common currency among nations to help achieve a better future—reducing inequalities that lead to helplessness, anger and despair.

The growing dissatisfaction amongst Americans about our over-reliance on military power internationally reminds us of the potential for the field of health diplomacy to improve global health and cooperation. And the words of President John F. Kennedy remind us why this agenda is so important: "Our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal."

Our common quest for good health knows no borders. Crossing countries, politics and cultures, health diplomacy recognizes the increasing interdependence of nations and our shared humanity.

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