

BIOGRAPHY

Professor Pekka Puska

Director General

National Public Health Institute

Finland



Professor Pekka Puska is currently the Director General of the National Public Health Institute of Finland (KTL). KTL is a comprehensive national public health institute under Ministry of Health in Finland. It employs some one thousand persons and covers a broad range of health issues from chronic diseases, nutrition and health behaviours to infectious diseases, vaccination programmes and environmental health. KTL has major public health functions, various surveillance tasks, high level research and numerous international activities.

Prior to his present position professor Puska was the Director for Noncommunicable Disease Prevention and Health Promotion at the World Health Organization Headquarters in Geneva. His previous work in Finland and internationally was strong background when he helped WHO to upgrade its work to respond to the rapid increase of chronic noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) in many parts of the world. According to the latest statistics NCDs are responsible for about 60% of all deaths. A vast majority of these deaths are in the developing world where these diseases, and their risk factors, are moving to poorer counties and within population to the lower socioeconomic parts of the population.

At WHO, Pekka Puska directed the work on integrated prevention of NCD targeting the main risk factors (tobacco, unhealthy diet and physical inactivity) through broad health promotion, national programmes, policy measures and regional networks. Professor Puska's Department also worked on school health & youth health promotion, ageing and life-course, health behaviour surveillance, oral health, evidence in health promotion etc. Professor Puska's Department was the focal point of this work that culminated in adoption of the Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health by the World Health Assembly in 2004. Practical programmes at WHO included the global QUIT AND WIN (Smoking cessation campaign), coordinated by KTL in Finland.

Before joining WHO, professor Puska has, for most of his career, worked at the National Public Health Institute as Director of the Department of Epidemiology and Health Promotion. He was, for 25 years, the Director and Principal Investigator of the North Karelia Project: prevention of cardiovascular diseases in the province and later on in all Finland. Within 25 years, about 80% decline in annual heart disease mortality among the working age population and a dramatic general improvement in public health took place. The project is widely seen as a model for successful population based prevention of cardiovascular and other noncommunicable diseases.

Professor Puska has, internationally, been involved in a number of scientific, expert and public health functions e.g. scientific conferences, WHO's expert work, international consultations, multinational research projects etc. He has over 500 scientific publications in the field of epidemiology, preventive medicine, health promotion and public health. Professor Puska has served as a Member of the National Parliament of Finland, as well as the Elector of the President of the Republic. He has also served as chairman of the Finnish Centre for Health Promotion, has chaired the Scientific Committee of the World Health Education Conference in Helsinki in 1991, and the International Steering Committee of the 12th World Conference on Tobacco or Health, held in Helsinki, Finland in 2003. Currently he chairs the Organizing Committee of the International Conference of Diabetes Prevention, to be held in Helsinki in 2008.

In his current position as Director General of the National Public Health Institute (KTL) professor Puska has a central position in Finnish public health work and health policy, while he also maintains a number of international commitments. Among other things, he is currently the chair of National Nutrition Council, the President of Finnish Heart Association and chair of the Board of the UKK Institute for health promotion.

Internationally, Professor Puska is the President elect of World Heart Federation and the Vice-President of the International Association of National Public Health Institutes (IANPHI). The association links the national public health institutes of the world and helps countries to establish or develop their institutes to strengthen the national public health infrastructure. Professor Puska also represents Finland in the Governing Council of the WHO International Agency for Cancer Research (IARC).

Professor Puska has M.D and M.Pol.Sc. degrees and PhD in epidemiology and public health. Among several honours are Honorary Doctorate at St. Andrew's University (Scotland) and Academician of Russian Academy of Natural Sciences. He has received, among other things, WHO's annual Health Education Award in 1990, WHO Tobacco Free World Award in 1999, the Nordic Award for Public Health in 2005, and the Rank Prize in 2008.