

Offline: Progress is possible, if we choose it

“We have got to exit this swamp of empty promises”, insisted Gavin Yamey at the launch of *Global Health 2050: the Path to Halving Premature Death by mid-Century*, a *Lancet* Commission launched last week at the World Health Summit in Berlin, Germany. Led by Dean Jamison and Larry Summers, the Commission’s seven key messages deserve to be memorised. One: nations that choose to do so can achieve the goal of 50×50—a 50% reduction in the probability of death before age 70 years by 2050. Two: sharp reductions in mortality and morbidity can be achieved early on the path to universal health coverage (UHC)—we do not have to wait for a perfect health system before important health gains can be won. Three: the UHC agenda needs a reset—instead of vague appeals for health system strengthening, the Commission proposed a modular approach, identifying 19 cost-effective health-benefits packages. Four: countries should publicly finance a shortlist of key medicines for 15 priority conditions, divided into two groups—infectious and maternal health conditions and non-communicable diseases and injuries. Five: tobacco is the new tobacco—reducing smoking is the single most important intersectoral policy to reach 50×50. Six: there is a high risk of another pandemic of COVID-19-like magnitude—so prepare for it, now. Seven: there remains a crucial role for development assistance—direct support to the most resource-poor countries and investments in global public goods, such as systems to prevent and respond to new pandemics. National Commissions are being prepared in Nepal, the USA, and Nigeria.

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The evening before the launch of *Global Health 2050*, I asked one conference delegate how she thought the meeting was going. She was from a country where women and children are presently being bombed, burned, and crushed with impunity, while European and North American political leaders stand watching and wringing their hands. She explained how difficult it was for her to be in Berlin talking about health, while her family was struggling simply to survive amid missiles and bullets. According to the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, there are today: 45 armed conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa; 35 in sub-Saharan Africa; 21 in Asia; seven in Europe; and

six in Latin America. This latest *Lancet* Commission offers an extraordinary opportunity—and, make no mistake, it is an extraordinary opportunity. But one must frame it between two axes: conflict and, of course, climate change.

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Jamison and his team have been here before. In 2013, they published their first *Lancet* report—*Global Health 2035: a World Converging within a Generation*. 2013 was the high point of euphoria about the Millennium Development Goals—peak hope. A strange time to recall now. Unparalleled political and financial commitments to global health. An intoxication with the possibility of a different world, one underpinned by the values of equity and liberty. New ideas, new leadership, and new institutions were being created. It would be a world where every life was respected and protected, where every person had the right to reach for their desired future. And then it stalled. Why? Each of us will have our own preferred explanation. In my sphere of the planet: Trump, Brexit, and waves of extreme populism that continue to roll ashore to this day. A pandemic that deflected us, punished us for our past failures, and punctured our hubris (the lessons from which we still refuse to learn). A distasteful antipathy for our displaced neighbours, whom we disparage as migrants, which has normalised racism in the public sphere. And war. It is astonishing to remember that in 2011 I was in Moscow watching WHO’s then Director-General, Margaret Chan, teasing Vladimir Putin for arriving late. I left Moscow hopeful about the part Russia might play in a more inclusive global health. What fool was I? My point is that the political conditions in 2024 are not as propitious as they were in 2013. Except that we have, perhaps, one great advantage. I sense a strengthening resistance among us, a toughening refusal to accept the emerging status quo of human brutalisation, bigotry and prejudice, and planetary destruction. The multiple strands of existing global health activism—from climate to gender, race to peace—must be woven together into a single movement and manifesto for immediate action. *Global Health 2050* offers a means and motivation to do so.

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