



Profile

Keith Martin—crusader for health and the planet



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Running the world’s largest academic-based consortium of disparate institutions to address challenges in global health requires leadership, vision, diplomacy, and, above all, energy. Keith Martin has all those attributes. A passionate global health physician, Martin is the founding Executive Director of the Consortium of Universities for Global Health (CUGH) in Washington, DC, USA. Under his helm, CUGH has grown from 53 to 150 institutions and organisations worldwide and includes 30 000 individual global health experts. The consortium’s annual conference, now in its eighth year, has become a key event in the global health calendar.

Born in London, UK, to immigrant parents from India, he grew up in Toronto, Canada. As a child from a minority background, he recalls his sensitivity towards excluded populations, and his early interest in the environment and conservation. “I originally wanted to be a veterinarian and work in Africa. But I decided to be a physician as I thought I could, through this path, exercise my desire to improve the health of the poorest amongst us and exercise my passion for conservation”, he says. From 1987 to 2006, he practised emergency medicine and general practice in British Columbia, Canada, and in a South African rural hospital on the Mozambique border during the civil war. He worked with first nation populations, and with patients who were homeless, or in jails and detention centres. Working with the disadvantaged was important, says Martin: “I learnt a tremendous amount about why these people got sick and fell through the cracks of life. The remarkable privilege of being a physician or any health-care worker is that you have insights into people’s lives that nobody else does in society. It makes you aware of the larger societal challenges that underpin ill health and the obstacles that people face in their lives”. Whether working in Canada or in South Africa during Apartheid, Martin was struck by how bad political decisions and poor governance could cause immense harm. “Other than a pandemic, nothing harms people faster! That’s when I had a crisis in conscience that if I didn’t go into politics, if I didn’t at least try to address these challenges, I thought that I would not be doing my job as a physician. I wanted to practise medicine through politics.”

In 1993, aged just 33 years, Martin was elected as a Canadian Member of Parliament and served six successful terms until 2011, focusing on foreign affairs, defence, health, international development, and the environment. In that time, he learnt that a chasm exists between what academia produces and what policy makers use in the development of public policies. “We sit on a vast trove of knowledge that was generated at immense cost/effort. But only a trickle of that is used in public policy. It is a terrible waste. Our field of knowledge production should be at least matched/exceeded by the urgency to implement what we already

know. If we do that, we will make an enormous difference in people’s lives”, he says. When Stephen Harper became Canadian Prime Minister, the political environment changed. Rapid partisanship was rewarded and efforts to address the public good were eroded. Martin then left politics eager to mobilise academia’s role to improve lives. CUGH was an ideal platform to continue this work. “I get to work with some of the brightest minds anywhere. Many of whom are public servants and work silently for the public good at a cost to themselves and have put their own lives at risk as we saw during the Ebola outbreak. It is really humbling and an immense honour to work with them.”

This year’s CUGH conference theme, Healthy People, Healthy Ecosystems, particularly resonates with Martin. He has always believed that the health of the environment and the health of people are indivisible. When he worked in South Africa, he volunteered with the KwaZulu-Natal conservation rangers and went on anti-poaching patrols and saw how conservation both protects ecosystems and generates funds and public goods that can benefit local communities. “People in developing countries often sit close by or within extremely valuable ecosystems. The world’s incredible biodiversity is under extreme threat. We are now in the sixth mass extinction in our planet’s history, where we have lost more than 50% of the planet’s wildlife over the last 40 years. We are exceeding the planet’s capacity to provide for our needs. The sustainable management of ecosystems can be a path to reducing poverty, ill-health, and environmental degradation. It is a completely underutilised opportunity”, he explains.

Martin believes global health and environmental health are under threat. In response, CUGH are strengthening advocacy efforts. “The new US administration has expressed its intent to remove regulations and resources from organisations such as the NIH-Fogarty International Center, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, USAID, Environmental Protection Agency, and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration that protect people’s health in the USA and around the world. We as members of the global health community must speak out in opposition to those policies that are going to cause harm and publicly champion solutions that will improve the health of people and the planet. The foundation of stable, prosperous nations is comprised of good governance and effective public institutions that can deliver public goods. Without this neglected foundation, sustainable development cannot occur. We, the global health community, have a moral obligation to speak out. If we do not, then we leave a clear runway for people to enact political decisions that can cause great harm”, he warns.

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For more on CUGH and its eighth annual Global Health Conference, in Washington, DC, USA, on April 6–9, 2017 see <http://www.cugh.org/>

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