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Commentary

International Adolescent Health Week: *Nothing About Them Without Them*

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International Adolescent Health Week (IAHW) is an annual health campaign consisting of dynamic participatory events to inspire adolescents and their communities to advocate for a successful transition into adulthood. Initiated as “Pennsylvania Teen Health Week” in 2016 and observed globally since 2018, IAHW involves young people in the planning of activities, offering opportunities for youth to become active participants in contributing to their own communities, empowering them to make changes and develop life skills.

Since the adoption of the sustainable development goals in 2015, young people have increasingly been recognized as having the right to express their views as stakeholders in the world’s future by the UN agencies, including UNICEF and the WHO [1]. The introduction of Youth Ambassadors for IAHW aligns with the Meaningful Adolescent and Youth Engagement (MAYE) statement, which calls for a shift in focus from young people as only beneficiaries to co-producers who are involved directly in policy and program development and implementation [2]. The WHO’s *Global Accelerated Action for the Health of Adolescents* specifically calls for adolescent participation in policy decisions and for the inclusion of their expectations and perspectives in national programming processes [3]. While the reality of sustainable youth participation in policymaking remains a goal that has had limited success at the national or regional level, the importance of continued top-down and bottom-up efforts by global bodies and by professional civil society groups cannot be underestimated [4].

Youth Ambassadors (YAs) were recruited to provide input into the development of IAHW 2021 and to champion it in their own countries. Online applications were publicized through the

IAHW website, social media, international organizations, and personal outreach by members of the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine (SAHM) and the International Association for Adolescent Health (IAAH). Young people between the ages of 13 and 24 were eligible to apply; youth under the age of 18 required the permission of a parent or guardian. The application questions included open responses about adolescents’ perceptions of health issues, significant issues in their country or community, and suggestions for engaging in virtual events in 2021 because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

A total of 186 submissions were received from 18 countries, yielding 158 complete and eligible applications. The number of applicants varied widely, with a maximum of 78 from one country to a single applicant from seven countries. The average age of applicants was 18.9 years. Information about gender was not collected.

A group of six members of SAHM and IAAH scored each application, the top applicants from each of two age groups (13–18, 19–24) were discussed, and between 1–three YAs from 17 countries were invited to participate. All accepted the position, and the program was launched in November 2020. YAs participated and provided input via monthly video meetings and provided input via email and digital surveys. YAs were invited to be guests at SAHM IAHW Special Interest Group (SIG) meetings. Applicants who were not selected were encouraged to promote IAHW at a local level as Youth Advocates.

Most applicants indicated an interest in being a YA because they wanted to be role models in promoting adolescent health nationally or internationally. Many youths specifically mentioned an interest in promoting mental health awareness. Several adolescents were motivated by their own struggles with mental and physical health and wanted to support others with similar experiences. A few adolescents saw this as an opportunity to network internationally and build their leadership skills.

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Mental health difficulties, especially anxiety, depression, and substance misuse, were most often described as the major adolescent health concerns. Other important issues were teenage pregnancy, chronic health conditions, lack of representation for LGBTQ adolescents, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV, obesity and malnutrition, youth unemployment, homelessness, and violence. A few young people highlighted addiction to social media and online gaming, as well as the effects of peer pressure.

Recognizing the ongoing limitations due to COVID-19 restrictions, applicants suggested virtual events for IAHW 2021, such as streaming of activities on various social media platforms to promote mental, physical, and sexual health; webinars, online concerts, and quizzes with prizes, virtual flash mobs, surveys, competitions like making digital posters and even stress balls!

Adolescent health organizations, including SAHM and IAAH, have long engaged with young people, both directly and indirectly. SAHM's mission includes "...engaging adolescents through its professional members," and IAAH's mission includes "catalyzing local, regional, and international connections between multidisciplinary professionals who work with adolescents, the organizations that support them, and young people themselves." Both IAAH and SAHM have active young professional groups, as do many other national child and adolescent health organizations. At an earlier stage in professional training, the International Federation of Medical Student Organizations (IFMSA), an independent student organization representing 133 member organizations and more than a million students from 123 countries, strives to involve young people directly in its initiatives.

We aim to catalyze local, regional, and international connections between multidisciplinary professionals who work with adolescents, the organizations that support them, and young people themselves. The IAHW Youth Ambassador program strives to be relevant and impactful in promoting adolescent health by engaging directly with adolescents themselves and incorporating their voices and opinions into resources, event planning, promotion and topics of International Adolescent Health Week.

IAHW 2021 has formalized youth engagement in IAHW's ongoing evolution, with youth ambassadors from five continents working closely with community and national adolescent health leaders to increase the impact of this year's efforts. YAs feedback will also help inform future years' IAHW Youth Ambassador Programs.

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