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Reflecting digital transformations in public health curricula: guidance for public health schools

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Public health education and training must include digital skills to maximise the positive public health impact of digital technologies. While these tools have proven valuable, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, most public health curricula have not yet prioritised teaching digital skills and their implementation throughout essential public health functions. Drawing on existing frameworks from healthcare and emerging initiatives like the WHO Digital Health Competency Framework, the BeWell project, and the ASPHER Core Curriculum for Public Health, we outline the essential knowledge areas that students and professionals need: basic IT skills, managing and analysing large health datasets, communicating effectively through digital channels, understanding the ethical and legal issues around data and privacy, and recognising both the promise and the risks of artificial intelligence. To ensure these competencies are learned in context, we recommend including digital topics into core public health courses, such as adding the analysis of novel health data sources into epidemiology or designing social media strategies in health promotion courses, instead of emphasising digital tools and skills only as part of separate electives. We also stress the importance of teaching leadership and change-management skills so public health graduates can guide organisations through digital shifts and provide ongoing training for the current workforce. Finally, by encouraging collaboration between public health, computer science, and engineering departments, public health schools can build an interdisciplinary community that works together on digital health challenges. With these changes, public health professionals will be better equipped to leverage emerging digital technology responsibly and effectively and help improve health outcomes for all.