



World Health Organization

## Peter Salama

Medical epidemiologist and Executive Director of WHO's Division for Universal Health Coverage. Born in Melbourne, VIC, Australia, on Dec 22, 1968, he died of a suspected heart attack in Geneva, Switzerland, on Jan 23, 2020, aged 51 years.

Peter Salama's last mission was to Somalia in early January, 2020, to work with officials there on a roadmap for delivering universal health coverage (UHC). Salama, who accepted the position as Executive Director of WHO's Division for UHC/Life Course in 2019, was attempting to coordinate the delivery of UHC to 1 billion more people by 2023. In making war-torn Somalia an early priority, it was clear how he planned to approach the task, said Mike Ryan, the Executive Director of WHO's Health Emergencies Programme: "He just went to one of the most difficult and complex environments you could choose to reach UHC with the government and health partners", Ryan said. "It's a sign of the man. He's going to find the biggest mountain and climb it." Salama's career spanned top jobs at health and humanitarian agencies and running programmes in countries facing complex humanitarian situations. He possessed the ability to thrive in either setting. "He was brilliant technically, strategically, managerially, and politically. And no matter what issues you put on the table, he could provide a true field perspective on the realities", said Rick Brennan, acting Regional Emergency Director for WHO's Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean.

Salama completed his medical studies at Australia's Melbourne University in 1993, before obtaining a Master of Public Health at Harvard University in the USA. He worked for Médecins Sans Frontières and Concern Worldwide in several

countries in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia and was selected for the Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS) programme at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, USA, which he completed in 2001. His capabilities were recognised early, said Robin Nandy, UNICEF's Principal Adviser and Chief of Immunization, who first met Salama when he was in the EIS programme. "The more experienced people in the field used to talk among themselves that Peter Salama is the future of humanitarian health, the future of global health."

While at EIS, Salama co-led an epidemiological mortality survey of the recently concluded conflict in Kosovo that set a trajectory for his career. "From there, Peter skyrocketed in terms of what he accomplished and what we all knew he would do in the future", said Paul Spiegel, the lead author of the survey and now Director of the Center for Humanitarian Health at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore, USA. "He had several unique capabilities: technical expertise, the experience of previously working with humanitarian NGOs in the field, an incredible strategist who was able to analyse a complex situation and come up with clear and practical solutions", said Spiegel.

From the EIS programme, Salama moved to Afghanistan, where he worked as UNICEF's Chief of Health and Nutrition. After the fall of the Taliban, he was instrumental in rapidly setting up public health programmes, including a measles vaccination effort. Mickey Chopra, now the World Bank's Global Solutions Lead for Service Delivery, said Salama was still regularly praised for the systems he helped to establish years after he left. "He was not just someone who had gone through the gilded ivory tour and landed in the UN", Chopra said. "He actually spent a lot of time on the front lines." Salama moved between positions in global headquarters, including UNICEF's Chief of Global Health and Principal Advisor on HIV/AIDS, and country-based roles that included UNICEF's Representative in Ethiopia and Zimbabwe. He also led the agency's global response to the 2014–16 west Africa Ebola outbreak. Chopra said: "There you really saw how he had this 360-degree vision of all the different components of what was necessary to do, from political acumen through to being an epidemiologist, himself, and knowing the science of it." Zulfiqar Bhutta, the Inaugural Robert Harding Chair in Global Child Health at The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, Canada, said Salama was also eager to learn from others: "He was totally open to ideas and very focused on evidence-informed policy."

In 2016, Salama became head of WHO's Health Emergencies Programme and 3 years later took over WHO's Division for UHC. "You knew he was going to accomplish so much more", Spiegel said. "That is a loss beyond mourning what he's already accomplished." Salama is survived by his wife, Annalies Borrel, and their three sons, Luca, Kai, and Mathis. "He was stretched in many different directions, but he went out of his way to always make time for his wife and kids", Nandy said.

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