



## The Social Sciences and Management of Health Services

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### Description

Public health has been defined as "the science and art of preventing disease", prolonging life and improving quality of life through organized efforts and informed choices of society, organizations (public and private), communities and individuals. The public can be as small as a handful of people or as large as a village or an entire city. The concept of health takes into account physical, psychological, and social well-being. As such, according to the World Health Organization, "health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity".

### Public Health

Public health is a complex term, composed of many elements and different practices. It is a multi-faceted, interdisciplinary field. For example, epidemiology, biostatistics, social sciences and management of health services are all relevant. Other important sub-fields include environmental health, community health, behavioral health, health economics, public policy, mental health, health education, health politics, occupational safety, disability, gender issues in health, and sexual and reproductive health.

Modern public health practice requires multidisciplinary teams of public health workers and professionals. Teams might include epidemiologists, biostatisticians, physician assistants, public health nurses, midwives, medical microbiologists, pharmacists, economists, sociologists, geneticists, data managers, environmental health officers (public health inspectors), bioethicists, gender experts, sexual and reproductive health specialists, physicians, and veterinarians.

Many health problems are due to maladaptive personal behaviors. From an evolutionary psychology perspective, over consumption of novel substances that are harmful is due to the activation of an evolved reward system for substances such as drugs, tobacco, alcohol, refined salt, fat, and carbohydrates. New technologies such as modern transportation also cause reduced physical activity. Research has found that behavior is more effectively changed by taking evolutionary motivations into consideration instead of only presenting information about health effects. The marketing industry has long known the importance of associating products with high status and attractiveness to others. Films are increasingly being recognized as a public health tool. In fact, film festivals and competitions have been established to specifically promote films about health. Conversely, it has been argued

that emphasizing the harmful and undesirable effects of tobacco smoking on other persons and imposing smoking bans in public places have been particularly effective in reducing tobacco smoking.

With the onset of the epidemiological transition and as the prevalence of infectious diseases decreased through the 20th century, public health began to put more focus on chronic diseases such as cancer and heart disease. Previous efforts in many developed countries had already led to dramatic reductions in the infant mortality rate using preventive methods. In Britain, the infant mortality rate fell from over 15% in 1870 to 7% by 1930.

A major public health concern in developing countries is poor maternal and child health, exacerbated by malnutrition and poverty. The WHO reports that a lack of exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of life contributes to over a million avoidable child deaths each year.

### Public Health Surveillance

Public health surveillance has led to the identification and prioritization of many public health issues facing the world today, including HIV/AIDS, diabetes, waterborne diseases, zoonotic diseases, and antibiotic resistance leading to the reemergence of infectious diseases such as tuberculosis. Antibiotic resistance, also known as drug resistance, was the theme of world health day 2011.

The World Health Organization (WHO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations responsible for international public health. The WHO Constitution, which establishes the agency's governing structure and principles, states its main objective as "the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health". The WHO's broad mandate includes advocating for universal healthcare, monitoring public health risks, coordinating responses to health emergencies, and promoting human health and wellbeing. The WHO has played a leading role in several public health achievements, most notably the eradication of smallpox, the near-eradication of polio, and the development of an Ebola vaccine. Its current priorities include communicable diseases, particularly HIV/AIDS, Ebola, COVID-19, malaria and tuberculosis; non-communicable diseases such as heart disease and cancer; healthy diet, nutrition, and food security; occupational health; and substance abuse.

For example, the WHO reports that at least 220 million people worldwide suffer from diabetes. Its incidence is increasing rapidly, and it is projected that the number of diabetes deaths will double by 2030. In a June 2010 editorial in the medical journal *The Lancet*, the authors opined that "The fact that type 2 diabetes, a largely preventable disorder, has reached epidemic proportion is a public health humiliation." The risk of type 2 diabetes is closely linked with the growing problem of obesity. The WHO's latest estimates as of June 2016 highlighted that globally approximately 1.9 billion adults were overweight in 2014, and 41 million children under the age of five were overweight in 2014. Once considered a problem in high-income countries, it is now on the rise in low-income countries, especially in urban settings. Many public health programs are increasingly dedicating attention and resources to the issue of obesity, with objectives to address the underlying causes including healthy diet and physical exercise.

Priorities of Public Health

The elements and priorities of public health have evolved over time, and are continuing to evolve. Different regions in the world can have different public health concerns at a given time. Common public health initiatives include promotion of hand-washing and

breastfeeding, delivery of vaccinations, suicide prevention, smoking cessation, obesity education, increasing healthcare accessibility and distribution of condoms to control the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.