What is Public Health? – Principles of Health Equity and Social Justice
What is health?

In public health research we often ask people to answer the following question:

“In general, would you say that your health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?”
What is health?

• How would you answer this question for yourself?

• Why did you answer the way you did?

• What factors did you consider in answering this question for yourself?

• What factors do you think might impact the way someone else might answer the question?
First, we need to consider what shapes our own definition of health.

- Defining health is influenced by our culture, family experience, social circles, friends, etc.

- Over the course of our lives we have developed expectations of what our health should be.

- Our life experiences may include many interactions with health providers or very few. For example, we all have experienced varying degrees of life stress, and or physical pain.

- Some of us may have been diagnosed with health problems that resolved or continue to impact our lives.
Medical diagnoses are typically divided into two categories: acute or chronic disease diagnoses.

Reflect! Some of you may have had several acute illnesses which can make you feel unhealthy or some of you may suffer from one or more chronic conditions which can influence how you would rate your own health.
How People Rate Health Conditions

Despite the number of diagnoses some people may still rate their health as good because their current conditions are well controlled.

In addition, some people may have medical conditions but may feel they are able to accommodate or adjust to their conditions and thus, have a sense of stability in their lives. Therefore, we as people have the ability and have the quality of life we desire to be happy.

Sigmund Freud once commented that in order for us to be happy we need to have the ability to love and to work. Perhaps that is also true for self reports of health by individuals – that if they are able to love and to work and meet their basic needs they may consider themselves healthy.
We have learned that each of us has our own definitions of health.

Overtime health professionals have sought to define health in a manner which can be agreed upon across cultures and across professional disciplines.

The most established definition of health was defined in 1948 by the World Health Organization (WHO). WHO defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.
Let’s review the three domains of public health: physical, mental and social well-being. Click on each link to learn more and to view examples.
Since the WHO definition has not changed since 1948 it must be good, right? But, what might be some of the problems with this definition?

We must consider the following question: Is “complete physical, mental and social well-being” really possible?

This figure shows how chronic diseases affects the aging population throughout the world.

People are living longer with more disability – it is estimated that health is not just about physical capacity, but also reflects social and personal resources.
People are living longer with more disability — Over a billion people, about 15 percent of the world's population, have some form of disability. Between 110 million and 190 million adults have significant difficulties in functioning. Rates of disability are increasing due to population aging and increases in chronic health conditions, among other causes.

We must consider the following question: Can individuals suffering from a variety of disabilities ever have complete absence of disease or infirmity? Yet, with appropriate services and accommodations and assistive devices many can lead independent and productive lives.

Click here to gain full article on disability and health.
Chronic diseases are increasing around the world. The burden of chronic diseases is rapidly increasing worldwide. It has been calculated that, in 2001, chronic diseases contributed approximately 60% of the 56.5 million total reported deaths in the world and approximately 46% of the global burden of disease (1). The proportion of the burden of chronic diseases is expected to increase to 57% by 2020.

With appropriate medication and behavioral changes many individuals with chronic diseases can live independent and productive lives. Health is not just about physical capacity, but also reflects social and personal resources.
Many people feel it is time to modify the definition of health. Here are just a few proposals of why we should consider expanding this definition.

- Cope with Life’s Demands
- Ability to Adapt and Self Manage
- State of Balance
Abraham Harold Maslow was an American psychologist known for creating a theory of psychological health predicated on fulfilling innate human needs in priority, culminating in self-actualization. According to Maslow, individuals are motivated by a hierarchy of needs. Once basic, biologic needs are fulfilled, higher levels of the pyramid can be met. Let’s consider how our basic needs can impact health.

**Safety & Security**

This level includes things like safety, protection, order, limits, etc. If you consider how humans have evolved over time, you can understand how our needs have evolved. Early humans were motivated by stay alive and protected from harsh elements and hungry predators. Today, obviously, we don't have saber tooth tigers roaming the world, but we do want to know that we are safe and secure. We are governed by laws that give us a sense of control within our environment, and protect us from living in chaos.
Social Determinants of Health

After getting one’s basic needs met, individuals often recognize other factors that have enabled them to be as healthy as they are: Access to a quality education, access to a living wage, access to a social support network, etc. These are all considered “Social Determinants of Health”.

There are two definitions of Social determinants of Health that we will review:

- **Global Perspective**

- **National Perspective**

Note: You may notice that the definitions are similar – the U.S. perspective also considers play and worship as important to health outcomes as well as specifically mentioning quality of life as compared to the more general “conditions of daily life.”
Equal Access to Social Determinants

We do not all have equal access to the social determinants of health. As you watch this video, do you notice any social determinants of health that are discussed?

Here is a more complete list of the Social determinants of Health.

- Education and literacy
- Employment and working conditions
- Food security
- Health care services
- Housing
- Income and its distribution
- Social safety net
- Social exclusion/social support/stress
- Unemployment and employment security
- Physical environment
- Coping skills
- Early life
- Healthy child development
- Personal health practices and coping skills
- Culture
- Gender roles/ perception
- Transportation
Now that we have a more detailed understanding of the factors that influence health, public health professionals have a significant challenge on their hands. The professional knowledge and skills of public health workers must relate to the core functions of public health. These core functions have changed as definitions of public health have changed.

Here are three historical definitions of public health:

1. Science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health and efficiency through organized community effort (Winslow, 1920).
3. Fulfilling society’s interest in assuring conditions in which people can be healthy (Institute of Medicine, 1988).
A more recent definition of public health is: "what we as a society do collectively to assure the conditions in which people can be healthy." - Institute of Medicine Report 2002. This definition is important to public health practice because it embraces the roles and responsibilities that all individuals can play to improve population health outcomes.
Public Health – Core Functionalities

There are three core functions of public health:

– Assessment
– Policy Development
– Assurance
Fulfilling the core functions (Assessment, Policy Development, and Assurance) requires collaborations between individuals, institutions, organizations and community members. Collectively we as health professionals need to:

- Increase Organizational Capacity (including assuring competent professionals)
- Engage Community Members
- Develop Partnerships and coalitions
- Identify and Analyze Health problems
- Select, Design and implement strategies
  - Public Health Education and Promotion (ex. Regarding the risks of smoking, training of physicians to assess and treat tobacco addiction)
  - Public Health Policy implementing (smoking bans, higher taxes on cigarettes)
  - Public Health Research (answering questions such as: are e-cigarettes safe? Are certain public health anti-smoking initiatives more effective than others?)
- Develop Effective Communication Efforts
- Conduct Evaluations (how do we know if our actions work)
Historically public health has come a long way in improving knowledge and skills to care for populations.

In this video, you’ll learn about one of the great public health victories - the eradication of a cholera outbreak in London. As you watch, what approach did John Snow take that would resonate with current day public health officials in terms of:

- Engaging Community Members
- Developing Partnerships and coalitions
- Identifying and Analyzing Health problems
- Selecting, Designing and implementing strategies
- Developing Effective Communication Efforts
- Conducting Evaluations

How the “ghost map” help end a killer disease.
10 Great Public Health Achievements in U.S.

The approach that John Snow took informed some of the 10 achievements in public health.

Top 10 Achievements in Public Health

1. Vaccination
2. Motor-vehicle safety
3. Safer workplaces
4. Control of infectious diseases
5. Decline in deaths from coronary heart disease and stroke
6. Safer and healthier foods
7. Healthier mothers and babies
8. Family planning
9. Fluoridation of drinking water
10. Recognition of tobacco use as a health hazard

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Unique Features of Public Health – Social Justice

In achieving these great successes and responding to new challenges in public health, the profession has cultivated unique features.

We will discuss all of these as the course unfolds but in this module we want to spend time focusing on the social justice philosophy.
Unique Features of Public Health – Social Justice

- Social Justice Philosophy
- Inherently Political
- Ever Expanding Agenda
- Link with government
- Grounded in science
- Focus on Prevention
- Uncommon professional culture
Social Justice – Defined

Social justice is defined as "... promoting a just society by challenging injustice and valuing diversity." It exists when "all people share a common humanity and therefore have a right to equitable treatment, support for their human rights, and a fair allocation of community resources" (Toowoomba Catholic Education, 2006).

In conditions of social justice, people are "not be discriminated against, nor their welfare and well-being constrained or prejudiced on the basis of gender, sexuality, religion, political affiliations, age, race, belief, disability, location, social class, socioeconomic circumstances, or other characteristic of background or group membership."

(Toowoomba Catholic Education, 2006)
Social Justice and Equal Access

Social justice is about assuring the protection of equal access to liberties, rights, and opportunities, as well as taking care of the least advantaged members of society.

Thus, whether something is just or unjust depends on whether it promotes or hinders equality of access to civil liberties, human rights, opportunities for healthy and fulfilling lives, as well as whether it allocates a fair share of benefits to the least advantaged members of society.
Social justice is really about equality. There are three domains of equality and equity are:

1. Equality of rights
2. Equality of opportunities
3. Equity in living conditions

Some important areas of inequality are:

- Distribution of Income
- Distribution of opportunities for work and remunerated employment
- Distribution of access to knowledge
- Distribution of opportunities for civic and political participation
- Distribution of health services

**Note:** You will likely notice that these are very similar to the social determinants of health that you are already aware of.
To understand the unequal access to the Social Determinants of Health and issues of social injustice we should not be surprised that health outcomes vary widely by population characteristics: income, race, location, etc.

Differential health outcomes can be considered health disparities which is "defined differences in health outcomes and their determinants between segments of the population, as defined by social, demographic, environmental, and geographic attributes"
In the following video, you will see an example of how disparities in health resulted from differences in access to the social determinants of health (primarily income) and social justice approaches (primarily government responses to closing of factories).
A term that is useful for us to consider in “unfair” health outcomes is health equity.

**What is health equity?**
According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), health equity is defined as the “the attainment of the highest level of health for all people.” Achieving health equity requires valuing everyone equally with focused and ongoing societal efforts to address avoidable inequalities, history and contemporary injustices and the elimination of health and health care disparities.

**What is health inequities?** Health disparities or health inequities are modifiable, associated with social disadvantage, and considered ethically unfair.

Here is a short video explaining health equity.
An example from the U.S. is that we might all agree that everyone should have access to a health care system which is affordable, available, accessible, accommodating, and accepting to their patients.

Note: This doesn’t always occur. Public health professionals need to address the impact of unequal access through a variety of programs.
In this video, we see how the principles of health equity and social justice can be operationalized in public health practice by professionals in Massachusetts. As you watch this identify those projects or programs that are most interesting to you.