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The Role of Public Health in the Health Care System

ISSUE

Over time, the scope of public health has broadened beyond surveillance and epidemiology to include efforts to prevent conditions that contribute to premature death. Challenged by fiscal constraints, the public health system requires data to determine marginal benefits and costs for the efficient allocation of funding. The essential issues are what characterizes a viable public health system and what are the roles of the government and other stakeholders in that system?

BACKGROUND

Public health is the science and art of disease prevention and health status improvement among a population through an organized effort, primarily government-sponsored, involving medical practice and social science disciplines. Public health activities include actions to prevent disease, protect the environment, respond to disasters, assure medical quality, monitor health status, conduct research, and lead planning efforts.

Public health, population health, and social determinants of health are interrelated. Population health involves outcomes of a group of individuals, including the distribution of such outcomes within the group. The social determinants of health are the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age, including the health system. In short, population health is the health status of a defined group of people; social determinants of health are the environmental and social conditions that impact that group; and public health is the amalgamation of clinical, environmental and social levers used to improve population health through, in part, improving the social determinants of health.

The scope of public health broadened significantly during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many cite Dr. John Snow’s scientific work in 1854 as the genesis of modern public health. Snow had used statistics (i.e. epidemiology) to trace a cholera outbreak in London to a contaminated water pump. The United States Public Health Service and Florida Department of Health both trace their origins to outbreaks of mosquito-vectored diseases that infected hundreds of thousands of victims from 1877-1905. Dr. Lester Breslow’s seminal study in the mid-20th century has been credited with broadening the scope of public health to include education and prevention through his quantitative work finding that following seven recommended behaviors were linked to longevity.

Although public health initiatives are linked to improved health status, funding tends to be tenuous. Several research studies suggest increased public health investments can produce measurable improvements in health, especially in low-resource communities. However, estimates consistently indicate less than five percent of national health
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spending is devoted to public health activities. Moreover, when funding depends upon a local tax base, economically disadvantaged communities struggle to support basic public health services. Public health funding indicators from 2010 to 2012 show Florida ranked in the lower half of states for funding per capita.

Public health tends to be underfunded for several reasons. First, many benefits are realized in the future. Dr. Breslow’s aforementioned work took 20 years to identify the benefits of the seven habits. Second, public health beneficiaries include people, who often do not recognize they have been helped. Furthermore, given the goal of prevention, beneficiaries of public health are also often unidentifiable. Third, as a provider of social goods, the public health system must contend with “free riders,” people who enjoy benefits of goods without contributing to their cost. Pervasive in public health, the free rider problem extends beyond community health departments encouraging the poor to receive free or low-cost services. For example, those who refrain from vaccination can be considered “free riders,” because they receive protection through the preventive actions of their vaccinated peers.

Florida plays a significant role in public health through its administration and funding of Medicaid, a joint federal-state medical assistance program that provides access to health care for low-income families and individuals. Florida Medicaid serves more than three million people. With the federal share included, the annual expenditure for Medicaid exceeds $20 billion, nearly 30 percent of the entire state budget. The challenges are to provide Medicaid with an appropriate level of funding, improve the health status of medically underserved people, optimize quality in Medicaid, and manage program costs.

Public health is an essential element of the patchwork of providers that comprise the health care safety net, which serves the uninsured, Medicaid, and other vulnerable populations. Public health contributes to a broader strategy to improve population health by using several social levers to reduce poverty and human suffering. Most individuals assume personal responsibility for their own health. However, society generally acknowledges its responsibility to promote safe, healthy communities and support vulnerable populations who need health care.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 authorizes the largest expansion in federal public health spending in decades, with $15 billion in new spending projected over 10 years. The goals are to improve population health, reduce health disparities, and moderate growth in medical care spending. However, these funds are often targeted in order to resolve debates about the size of the federal budget. Furthermore, public health funding has been cut severely at the state level in an effort to maintain a balanced budget.
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The link between public health initiatives and return on investment has been difficult to establish for several reasons. Significant disconnections between spending and outcomes in local medical care delivery occur because communities differ in how they allocate resources to address community health needs. Variation in funding and structure among states and communities make it difficult to gather, measure, and compare public health expenditures and program effectiveness, especially on a national basis. It is difficult to measure the effectiveness of public health activities, because spending data are nearly impossible to separate from national health accounts and must rely upon assumptions and estimations. Some policymakers say public health spending provides effective outreach to underserved populations, but data fail to support this assumption.

Florida fares better than national averages in some significant categories; however, there is substantial opportunity for improvement of population health in several dimensions. Although heart disease and cancer are the leading causes of death in Florida, mortality rates are favorable compared to national averages. Florida annually loses more children under age five to accidental drowning than any other state. This accidental drowning rate is 171 percent higher than the national average. Significant health disparities exist in Florida. Differences in life expectancy among Florida counties vary widely, and minorities tend to fare significantly worse with respect to deaths caused by heart disease, cancer and stroke. For the last two decades, the state has ranked in the lower tier for annual state-by-state comparisons of health status and health system performance.

As a state with a diverse population, Florida has unique public health needs. In addition to challenges with infectious diseases, Florida is routinely affected by flooding, hurricanes, wildfires, and other natural disasters. As a result, the state’s public health initiatives are often preparedness-focused. Florida is one of a few states that experienced a bioterrorism incident in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Florida faces challenges in its efforts to balance bioterrorism preparedness with other public health priorities.

Florida’s Department of Health has demonstrated an ability to leverage scarce resources and demonstrate return on investment. Non-profit and community-based organizations that support public health also expand and strengthen the social safety net. These organizations could benefit from the state’s ability to coordinate priorities and leverage existing resources to avoid unnecessary duplication of efforts.

PUBLIC POLICY POSITION

Florida Blue believes leading public health initiatives is one of the most important roles that government can play to improve the health status of populations, especially the
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Medically underserved. To that end, social levers that drive prevention and wellness must be employed to improve population health through, in part, improving the social determinants of health. In order to achieve and sustain healthy communities, governments at all levels must support the social safety net, which serves society’s vulnerable populations when they need care.

Because health is not highly valued until people get sick, the public health system is often underappreciated by beneficiaries and government leaders. The public health system must improve its ability to demonstrate its effectiveness in order to be sustainable, continuing its mission to improve population health status.

Optimize quality while appropriately managing cost in Florida’s Medicaid program. The state must provide Medicaid with an appropriate level of funding and support efforts to make Medicaid more fiscally sustainable through a keen focus on private innovation and the provision of quality health care.

Seek opportunities for public-private partnerships that can lead to innovation and beneficial outcomes. While public health is often perceived as a role and responsibility belonging exclusively to the government, there are opportunities for mutually beneficial private sector partnerships that can facilitate public health innovation and initiatives. It is also aligned with values of responsible corporate citizenship. The private market has a long history of being able to deliver innovative solutions to improve health care. Those innovations can thrive in a regulatory environment that promotes quality standards and eliminates onerous and outdated barriers.

Maximize the state’s role as a leader in public health to leverage and coordinate the efforts of non-profit organizations. The state must serve as a coordination point for non-profit organizations that support public health. By coordinating priorities and leveraging existing resources, the public health system can become more efficient, conserving scarce resources through the reduction of duplication of efforts and highlighting underutilized resources.

Design and implement efforts for measuring the impact of public health initiatives on outcomes. Evidence and data must be available in order to understand the impact of public health initiatives and to make persuasive requests for public health funding. Impact and outcome data has the potential to facilitate informed decision-making so scarce budget dollars are allocated more effectively.

Assess and implement initiatives to educate and encourage healthier lifestyles to prevent early onset of expensive chronic diseases. Florida must take great strides to
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make improvements in its health status indicators by understanding the social determinants of health to improve daily living conditions, especially for the medically underserved. Public health practitioners must measure and assess the impact of actions to determine the effective methods that achieve additional improvement.

Assess opportunities to impact major causes of death and prioritize efforts and funding accordingly. Current public health efforts in these areas should be examined to determine if funds are allocated in a way that maximizes the marginal benefit of the last dollar spent on such programs.

Maximize efforts to address determinants of health, with a keen focus on children. Children must live in a safe and stable environment that promotes healthy behaviors. This environment facilitates the ability of children to learn and develop, leading to greater opportunities to achieve higher level skills and education. Higher income and education are correlated with improved health status.

REFERENCES

Florida Blue Subject Matter Experts

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- Dr. Uday Deshmukh, Senior Medical Director, Care Management, Delivery System
- Susan Towler, Vice President, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Florida Foundation
- Velma Monteiro-Tribble, Director, Grants and Programs, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Florida Foundation

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