

EDITORIAL^a

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Addressing Social Determinants to Eliminate Health Disparities, Achieve Health Equity, and Improve Health.

The call for articles in this journal was for research and commentaries focused on social determinants of health. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines social determinants of health as "conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life (WHO, http://www.who.int/social_determinants/en/).” WHO further delineates that “these circumstances are shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources at global, national and local levels (WHO, http://www.who.int/social_determinants/en/).”

Globally, social determinants of health have been found to be the root cause of most illnesses and disease. In this issue, topics on social determinants span from individual health to population health.

Social determinants play an important role on health outcomes. Studies and reports demonstrate a link between health outcomes and health disparities, the disproportionate gap in health and healthcare across certain populations (Xia et al, 2015; Robbins JM et al, 2015; Shonkoff JP, Thomas Boyce W, and McEwen BS, 2009; Shavers VL, 2007; Wallerstein and Duran 2006). These populations experience a greater burden to health because of who they are and where they live as well as their state of well being. They are in a state of health disparities.

All too often the concept of health disparities is equated to race or ethnicity, yet, there are many dimensions of health disparities. Health disparities can stretch across all constructs and are closely associated with social, economic, and environmental exposure. Therefore, improving social, economic and environmental constructs could positively impact individual and population health outcomes.

There are several agencies that have set forth goals to improve population health and healthcare and implement intervention and disease prevention. For example, as mandated by the Minority Health and Health Disparities Research and Education Act of 2000 (P.L. 106-525), the National Institutes of Health/National Institute of Minority Health and Health Disparities creates centers of excellence to address health disparities. Located at universities, these address health disparities through research, training, and community engagement and outreach. The centers serve as local and/or state conduits to address environmental, biological, behavioral, and social factors associated with health disparities (National Institutes of Health/National Institute of Minority Health and Health Disparities).

Another national program, the Healthy People Program, emphasizes disease prevention and health promotion. As early as 1979, the original report was issued by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. The focus of the report was to reduce controllable health risks over a ten-year period (Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, 19-22 June, 1946; signed on 22 July 1946 by the representatives of 61 States (Official Records of the World Health Organization, no. 2, p. 100) and entered into force on 7 April 1948). Subsequently, approximately,

every ten years, another report was generated, i.e., Healthy People 1990, 2000, Healthy People 2010, and Healthy People 2020. The goals were updated and continue to focus on nationwide health promotion and disease prevention to improve health and eliminate health disparities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Secretary's Advisory Committee on National Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Objectives for 2020. Phase I report: Recommendations for the framework and format of Healthy People 2020. Section IV: Advisory Committee findings and recommendations. Available from:http://www.healthypeople.gov/sites/default/files/PhaseI_0.pdf).

Interestingly, over the past twenty years, Healthy People's overarching goals have emerged from reducing health disparities among Americans (Healthy People 2000); to eliminating health disparities (Healthy People 2010). Recently, the goal was expanded to achieving health equity, eliminating health disparities, and improving health to attain quality health for all persons (Healthy People 2020).

Healthy People 2020 has set forth goals to improve health by better understanding more about the context of health disparities and the U.S. population. According to the 2008 Census, there were approximately 304 million people identified as a member of a racial or ethnic minority population. Of these 51% were women; 12% were living in nursing homes or other residential care facilities and had a disability; 23% were living in rural areas; and approximately 77% lived in urban areas (U.S. Census Bureau, American FactFinder.2008).

In the past and to some extent presently, the focus to reduce health disparities links largely to screening, diagnosis and treatment of illnesses and diseases to achieve health equity. The absence of illness or disease is not a good measure of overall health. According to the WHO, the definition of Health is "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, 19-22 June, 1946; signed on 22 July 1946 by the representatives of 61 States (Official Records of the World Health Organization, no. 2, p. 100, and entered into force on 7 April 1948.)."

Many determinants influence individual and population health. These include behavior and lifestyle, culture, biology, genetics, health insurance, access to healthcare as well as quality healthcare services, socioeconomic status, environment, nutritious food, discrimination, racism, education and literacy levels, politics, and geographic location (rural and urban). Also, many social determinants of health exist in rural and urban settings. The rural communities are harder hit by experiencing poor to no access to transportation, groceries with healthy foods, and built environment as well as high-speed broadband. These lifestyle social determinants are important factors in addressing and eliminating health disparities.

There is an urgent call to find effective solutions to eliminate health disparities. New solutions are needed to break the cycle. Many strategies exist, yet they seem to not be working because the incidence and prevalence of disease continue to soar, especially in certain disadvantaged populations. Targeted efforts are needed to ensure the best population health. Also, building multi-disciplinary integrated approaches across sectors (including health professionals, scientist, medicine, and public health, and health promotion and education) utilizing evidence-based programs and best practices. Moreover, existing programs whose goals are to target health disparities should be assessed to determine their effectiveness for reducing and eliminating health disparities. Until effective solutions through political legislation and healthcare are found, it is critical to implement intervention and behavioral lifestyle changes as effective methods for prevention.

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