

Understanding Population Health

What is 'Population Health'?

'Health' is defined by the World Health Organisation as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease, or infirmity'. The word 'population' is defined as the 'total number of people or things in a given place or region.' The essence of this definition is that it emphasizes the orientation towards whole groups rather than individuals (Lawson et al, 2001). These two definitions have provided the basis for understanding what is meant by the term 'population health'.

Population health can be defined as

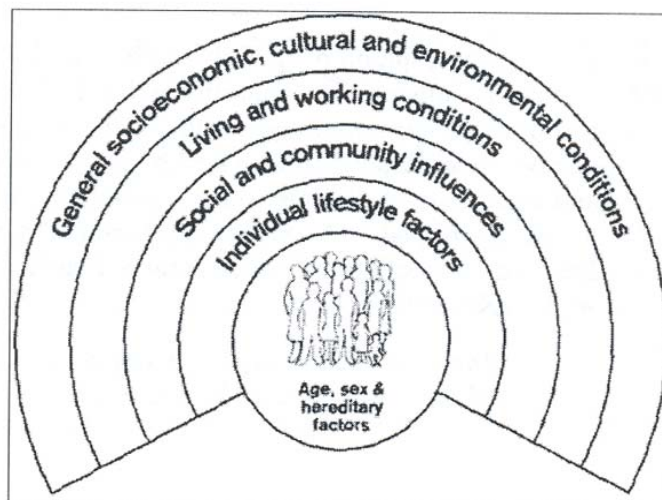
"The art and science of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health through organised efforts and informed choices of society, organisations, public and private; communities and individuals."

Population health is a contemporary definition for the work and approaches that have been used by Public Health Services, with a strong and overt emphasis on population level interventions.

The Canadian government in 'Strategies for Population Health, 1994' identifies that a population health approach encompasses the following characteristics:

- Addresses the entire range of factors that determine health, rather than focusing on risks and clinical factors related to particular diseases; this includes the social, cultural and economic environments. The diversity of factors that influence health status is identified in figure 1 below.

The determinants of health



Source: Policies and strategies for promoting social equity in health. G. Dahlgren and M. Whitehead, 1991.





- Affects the entire population rather than only ill or high-risk individuals. The population health focus on the health and wellbeing of populations, rather than individuals, means that it differs from other roles of the health system which are primarily responsible for treating illness or providing support to people whose health is compromised.

(in Young, 2005)



“If asked to depict our traditional view of health graphically, a photographer would likely provide a close-up of a patient being treated by a physician for a disease or symptom. To get a population perspective of health, that photographer would have to change the lens, step back, and take a wider shot. This broader perspective would take us beyond the clinical, one-to-one aspect of acute health care and enable us to view the connections that people have with specific aspects of both their physical and social environments.”

(Lawrence and Green, 2005: 2)



Where does population health fit on the continuum?

A focus on population health is a critical and complementary approach to the health care of individuals. In fact, both are necessary to achieve improvements in the health of populations. Therefore, programs of individual care and population health should be viewed as complementary and essential components of any health system which focus on different parts of the health continuum.



As the population’s burden of disease places increasing pressure on health care services, and increasing attention is being paid to the impact of inequities in health status related to socioeconomic and Indigenous status; the importance of prevention and a positive view of health is critical in determining the future of health service orientation and composition.

This is graphically represented in figure 2 on the following page.



Multidisciplinary and inter-sectoral approach

Effective population health approaches require partnerships with a broad range of stakeholders, including health service providers, clinical and non-clinical disciplines, non-health agencies, including agricultural and environmental scientists; sport and recreation professionals, urban planners, local government, home designers, school teachers; universities and research institutions; private industry and other health agencies including community-based services.



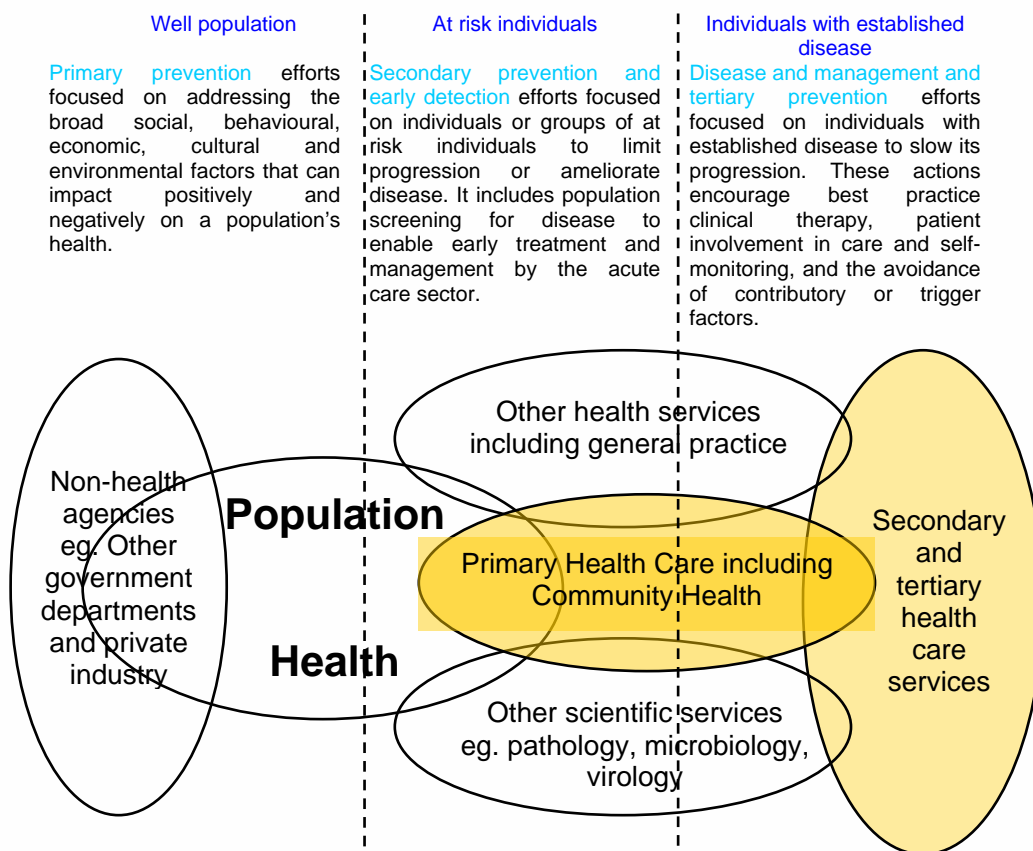
To achieve desired health outcomes, population health mechanisms need to operate across different levels in society. The respective roles of the levels of action can be demonstrated through using the example of disease control. At the local level, a population health officer would investigate a localised infectious disease outbreak in a primary school and provide advice and support for control measures to those directly affected. At a regional level, monitoring of communicable disease trends and liaison with health care providers would be undertaken to enable risk



assessment, early identification and implementation of appropriate preventive/management action. At a State level, strategic directions would be established for the monitoring and management of disease outbreaks including the development of disease outbreak management plans and protocols, coordination and negotiation across sectors and the development of comprehensive population health programs for implementation at a local/regional level. These different levels of action occur both within and outside of the health sector.

The relationships between the different agencies in the population across the health continuum are demonstrated in figure 2 on the following page.

Figure 2 - Population Health, the health continuum and collaborative partnerships with other disciplines

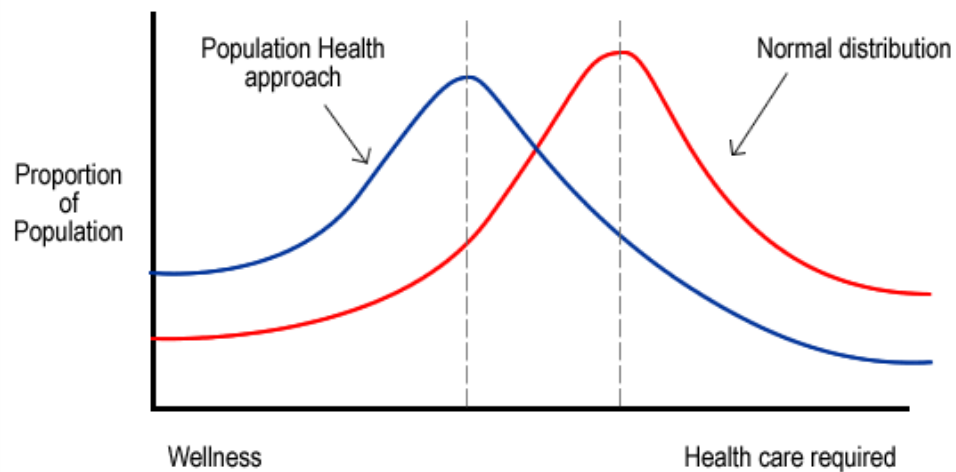


(adapted from Lawson et al, 2001; Eager et al, 2001 and Young et al, 2005)

Population health approaches

The key objectives of population health are protecting health, preventing disease, illness and injury and promoting health and wellbeing. Geoffrey Rose (1992) proposed that the most efficient way to prevent health problems in an individual is to reduce the whole population's level of risk. This requires strategies targeting the whole population. This is demonstrated in figure 3 below.





(adapted from Rose, 1993)

“A large number of people exposed to a small risk may generate many more cases than a small number exposed to a high risk”

“It makes little sense to expect individuals to behave differently from their peers; it is more appropriate to seek a general change in behavioural norms and in the circumstances that facilitate their adoption.”

(Rose, 1992)

Population health utilises a multi-strategy approach to improve health and wellbeing through:

- education, screening, immunisation and other interventions
- promoting and supporting healthy lifestyles and behaviours
- legislation, regulation and fiscal measures
- strengthening skills, competencies, systems and infrastructures in communities
- ensuring safe and healthy environments
- monitoring and surveillance.

As identified previously, population health does not reside solely in the province of the public sector, nor is it exclusive to the health sector (public, private or non-government). A broad range of stakeholders has an interest in and contribute directly or indirectly to the field of population health and the attainment of population health outcomes. This includes local government, tertiary education institutions, a range of state and commonwealth government departments (including education, transport, environment, police, families, primary industries and welfare), non-government and consumer organisations and the private sector. Therefore, a partnership approach is essential to achieving population health outcomes.

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