COMMENTARY ━━━━

The Untold Story of Population Health

Health is a personal and intimate experience shared through conversations with our doctors, family and friends, not merely a collection of facts and figures. A discussion about shrinking health care costs or expanding coverage inevitably leads to a story about a great doctor, a bad outcome or a serious disease. We have a need to share our pain, our fears and our relief about illnesses treated and cured. People don't tell stories about the times when nothing happens or goes wrong.

I began my career as a podiatrist specializing in the care of the lower-extremity complications of diabetes and vascular disease. I treated infections and gangrene, and often had to cut away dead tissue in the hopes of avoiding limb loss. My patients suffered from the largely avoidable complications of preventable diseases. They were the flesh and blood evidence of the failure of a system that devotes little of its considerable resources to preventing disease—and provides more "sick care" than health care. In frustration, I looked upstream to find the causes and rediscovered public health and population health. I learned that many people are trying to rewrite the story of health in our nation so that it begins with "happily ever after." More are joining us every day as the nation realizes there is not enough money in the US Treasury to treat every illness that could have been prevented.

Now I teach population health to graduate students, most of whom are full-time clinicians or other types of health care professionals. For many, it's a hard concept to grasp because they are trained to see health through the lens of patient encounters. Population health is more about what's not seen, what didn't happen, and persons unknown. It's about the diseases prevented and the complications averted. While population health doesn't make for great drama, it is vital to reducing the nation's health care costs and improving our sagging health outcomes.

Different -- and most times distinct -- from health care is public health, the community-based system of governmental and non-governmental organizational policies and services that protect us from disease by ensuring the water we drink, food we eat, the air we breathe, and places we live, work, and play are not hazardous to our health. Professionals in public health generally see the community as their patient because people living in healthy communities are themselves more likely to be healthy.

As "Obamacare" puts pressure on hospitals to improve outcomes, population health has become the new buzzword. Non-profit hospitals have to justify their charitable tax exemptions by documenting community benefit, not just financial solvency. All hospitals are now judged—and in part compensated—by outcomes, such as how often patients return with the same condition or a related preventable complication. Through a variety of carrots and sticks, local health care providers and insurers are encouraged to address broader community needs and to take a more patient-centered approach that emphasizes health outcomes rather than bottom lines.

Population health bridges the gap between health care and public health, encompassing key elements of both. Health care and public health are viewed as separate and distinct systems. The professionals in each have limited access to, contact with and awareness of each other. Opportunities for synergy are often missed. Population health is built on the premise that health care demand and quality is affected by the complementary activities of the public health system.

Conversely, information gathered and knowledge gained through the delivery of health care services can inform and direct more effective public health interventions.

Population health promotes the ideas that:

- Our health care system is more likely to be efficient and effective when fully integrated with community-based programs

- Patients heal better and faster when discharged from the hospital into a comprehensive home care system

- Hospitals are safer when administrators implement systems designed to eliminate medical errors and improve outcomes

- Health care providers perform better when they have access to a patient's complete medical history through a comprehensive electronic health record

- Health outcomes are improved and health care dollars are more wisely spent when clinicians base their decisions on evidence derived from objective research (evidence-based medicine)

- Our life expectancy and health status, and access to care shouldn't be determined by race, ethnicity, gender, wealth or zip code

- All of us benefit when our elected representatives enact health policies based on sound science.

Health, itself, is difficult to define. Many people see it as the mere absence of disease—another day without sickness. But what about the day *before* we get sick? Was there a moment, an opportunity to prevent

illness in the first place? Could an ounce of prevention save our nation a ton of expensive cure? The World Health Organization takes this broad view of health by defining it as "… a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."[1] Population health is an effort to achieve this lofty goal. ∎

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REFERENCES

1. World Health Organization. Frequently asked questions. 2013. http://www.who.int/suggestions/faq/en/. Accessed April 6, 2013.