



The Evolution of Population Health

What does population health mean to you?

Population health, according to the *American Journal of Public Health* is defined as: the health outcomes of a group of individuals, including the distribution of such outcomes within the group. These outcomes include mortality and health-related quality of life. Even though population health is a broad term, it is the responsibility of everyone --- from the patients themselves to the hospitals, clinics and care facilities, pharmacies, physicians and support staff, caregivers, public health agencies and policy managers. All of these individual components play a part in a patient's overall health, and thus can have an impact on health outcomes.

Evaluating population health:

State and local health departments are working to improve population health in many ways so that they can prevent epidemics, reduce or eliminate environmental hazards, and encouraging healthy behaviors among the total population. They evaluate health outcomes (mortality and quality of life) of the population based on many different disparities, including:

- Age
- Race
- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Geography
- Income
- Education

In addition, we can determine the outcomes, based on the disparities above, using any of the following factors:

- Health care received
- Individual behavior
- Social environment
- Physical environment

- Genetics

What Policies and Programs Can Improve Population Health?

Public health officials and private sector groups have been working to improve various aspects of public health for years. These investments have resulted in improved population health – in the form of improved quality of life and lower mortality rates in the U.S. For example, annual flu shots, childhood vaccinations and other immunization efforts continue to prevent illnesses as well as complications from communicable diseases and other life-threatening conditions. Think about the following programs and how they have worked to improve our country's population's health:

- Immunizations
- Prenatal programs
- Occupational health hazards
- Cigarette warnings and smoking cessation programs
- Dietary guidelines
- Child safety warnings and safety recall alerts

In addition, some national, state and local government agencies have instituted programs aimed at improving population health, including the:

- Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act
- National Strategy for Quality Improvement
- CMS Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation
- Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute
- Community Health Needs Assessment
- Public Health Accreditation Board

Some community organizations have surveyed the public in order to identify public needs for healthcare and related services. As a result of those needs, they have made improvements and started programs to improve the overall health of the community. Some examples of this include parks and recreation departments adding additional walking or biking trails for increased physical activity in a city or town; enhancing school lunch programs to include healthier options, and offering

support groups for individuals and caregivers dealing with a chronic condition such as diabetes, depression or heart disease.

Population Health and Information Technology:

At the heart of population health is the need to harness data and gather health information about the overall population – in order to use it for clinical decision-making, research and analysis. To accomplish this, health care organizations need to collect, manage and distribute updated health data and records. This requires some sort of EHR system at every patient touch point to gather and store crucial patient information across the continuum of care. Organizations will need to continue to evaluate and upgrade current workflow and information storage systems as new technologies emerge to allow for this capability, using technology partners and/or vendors to implement them. Beyond the EHR, health practices also need to be able to integrate health data with other systems outside their practice in order to measure and evaluate data, observe trends and make decisions to improve public health. A statewide health information exchange (HIE) serves this purpose because it assimilates multiple health systems into a common format for evaluation. This information can be used to assess risks and identify opportunities for improvement, as well as to make better decisions at the point of care. Eventually, statewide HIEs will merge into a nationwide HIE, which will allow for much greater analysis of the general population's health.

On the patient side, health technology tools make it easier for consumers to keep their personal health information electronically. Online health portals are one way that patients can continually share information with physicians – before, during and after care – and can offer additional insight for evaluating population health trends. Mobile health tools, monitoring devices, online education tools, support groups and even social media can play a part in keeping patients engaged, which can in turn improve overall population health.

Benefits of Improved Population Health:

Using the latest technology, health officials can effectively analyze health records to identify health trends and areas in need of improvement. Some of the other benefits of better population health include:

- Enhanced preventative care
- Successful disease management
- Lower mortality rates

- Fewer instances of disease
- Reduced errors, hospital admissions and readmissions
- Improved coordination of care
- Lower cost of care
- Patient-centered care
- Greater compliance with health regulations

As technology evolves, it continues to enhance the way physicians interact and diagnose patients, as well as the way health data is recorded, shared and evaluated. With improved information sharing and interoperability, health advocates can have the proper measuring tools to identify care gaps, determine behavior patterns, and monitor overall health conditions. In doing so, they can successfully implement programs, policies and improvements to improve population health.

**References: www.improvingpopulationhealth.org; www.adacemyhealth.org, www.healthcatalyst.com*