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## The contribution of hospital doctors to public health

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# THE CONTRIBUTION OF HOSPITAL DOCTORS TO PUBLIC HEALTH

## Introduction

To maintain their effectiveness as leaders in the delivery of healthcare, hospital doctors increasingly require a population approach to clinical practice. Historically, physicians practising within the traditional boundaries of healthcare services – primary and secondary care – have made substantial and often transformational contributions to the improvement of population health. However, emerging financial, demographic and public health challenges require NHS clinicians on the frontline of care to draw on increasingly stretched resources to manage clinical problems that are more complex than ever before.

The case is often made for the value of ‘population’ approaches to the organisation and management of health services (Gray & Ricciardi, 2010) - but what is the role of hospital doctors in furthering public health objectives? To do so, physicians should be aware of and seek to integrate public health principles into their everyday clinical practice, thereby equipping themselves to improve population health as well as the quality of care for individual patients.

## Defining public health

In the UK, a permanent challenge for public health professionals is to articulate the scope of their practice and ‘what public health is’ in ways that are accessible to people outside the profession, including clinical colleagues based in secondary care organisations. The working definition adopted by many public health systems is that offered by the World Health Organization, namely that public health is '*The science and art of promoting and protecting health and well-being, preventing ill-health and prolonging life through the organised efforts of society*' (Acheson, 1988). However, seemingly all-encompassing definitions offer little insight into the practical application of public health principles in clinical environments, which can seem intangible and esoteric for the ‘jobbing clinician’.

In practice, most public health work is conducted outside formal public health teams and organisations and by professionals whose job title does not include the words ‘public health’. It includes a diverse set of activities that aim to change the structures and environments in society that are determinants of health outcomes (including healthcare). Examples include:

developing interventions to improve school readiness and educational attainment among children and young people; ensuring people can find and maintain fulfilling work; tackling the causes of insecure housing and homelessness; and improving the effectiveness and efficiency of healthcare systems.

The defining characteristic of public health practice vis-a-vis clinical practice therefore lies in the unit of analysis – namely, the ‘population’ rather than ‘the patient’ (Frenk, 1993). The practice of public health - sometimes known as ‘population medicine’ (Gray J. A., 2013) is distinct from clinical practice (which focuses on the treatment of individual patients) in that it is primarily concerned with improving the health of ‘groups of patients’ who share particular characteristics. This insight takes root in the scientific basis of public health, which is fundamentally epidemiological, concerned with the relationships between exposures (e.g. smoking) and health outcomes (e.g. lung cancer) for defined populations (e.g. low-income people) over defined time periods.

In other respects, public health practice shares important characteristics with clinical medicine in general and academic medicine in particular. In common with both, public health is both a field of inquiry (the generation of evidence through research and epidemiological analysis) and a field of intervention (the use of best available evidence to inform and target efforts to improve health in the real world) (Frenk, 1993). In common with their hospital-based colleagues, public health professionals seek to evaluate and apply the best available evidence to develop interventions that improve health – in their case, of populations rather than individual patients (see Table 1).

## **Principles of public health practice**

How does a ‘population health’ approach translate into principles for practice that can have traction in clinical settings (Faculty of Public Health, 2010)? We present five core tenets of a public health approach that, when integrated into clinical practice, have the potential to greatly impact public health challenges.

- 1) **Evidence-based practice:** as is true in the practice of clinical medicine, evidence is the basis of public health action and underpins the other principles. Epidemiology is the scientific basis of public health; taking an epidemiological approach not just to the management of individual patients but to the provision of interventions and services can improve outcomes for whole populations of patients.

- 2) **Prevention:** preventing disease can avoid morbidity and mortality and reduce financial pressure on healthcare systems, freeing up resources (financial and human) to address the needs of other patients in the system.
- 3) **Addressing social and environmental determinants of health:** public health acknowledges that health outcomes are largely determined by social, economic and environmental conditions and that it is necessary to try to change them in order to most effectively address the causes of ill health.
- 4) **Reducing health inequalities by focusing on vulnerable groups:** public health is about values as much as evidence - it asserts that to achieve social justice requires us to prioritise addressing the health needs of the least well-off and most vulnerable people in society. This translates into a focus on vulnerable groups of people who often do not access the benefits of interventions intended to improve health and suffer most from their unintended consequences.
- 5) **Organisational and system stewardship of resources:** effective public health practice acknowledges that to improve health requires health services to be as efficient, effective and equitable as possible; this requires highly developed leadership and management skills as well as the application of evidence to support improvement.

## **Healthcare is an important determinant of population health**

It is important to be clear about the value of health services in addressing public health challenges. Estimates of the relative impact of healthcare as a determinant of 'population health' range between 15% and 40% (King's Fund, n.d.) . A reason commonly forwarded for its relative unimportance is that by intervening only when disease processes are well-established, healthcare fails to address the underlying social and environmental causes of ill health. Yet despite this, clinical medicine can lay claim to some outstanding achievements - applications of advances in basic science and translational medicine have yielded significant improvements in mortality, healthy life expectancy and quality of life at a population level, in addition to improving the health of individual patients (Gray & Ricciardi, 2010). For example, reductions in preventable mortality from cardiovascular disease, largely resulting from the introduction of innovative and evidence-based treatments, have revolutionised survival from once fatal conditions, with substantial population health benefits (Kruk, 2017).

Modern public health challenges related to the growing complexity of medical care cannot be solved without the engagement and leadership of clinicians. For that reason and by virtue of

their position as leaders in the provision of care within their organisations, physicians continue to be uniquely placed to address public health challenges in the course of their clinical practice.

## **Public health principles applied to contemporary clinical challenges**

At its heart, public health seeks to tackle the fundamental determinants of disease and ill health in populations - the 'causes of causes' - focusing on prevention through addressing socioeconomic and environmental risk factors rather than managing the conditions of individuals (Dahlgren & Whitehead, 1991). How then can clinicians, and hospital doctors in particular, be reasonably expected to contribute to the advancement of public health objectives? By analysing complex clinical challenges through the prism of public health's principles for practice, it is possible to distil the unique contribution of physicians to public health goals. The approach to a range of current and emerging clinical challenges can benefit from a public health perspective, and clinicians can often apply several public health principles simultaneously to improve the quality of care they provide for both patients and populations. In this way, providing high quality healthcare and furthering public health objectives are mutually reinforcing, as improving quality has the potential to dramatically impact health at a population level. The following examples demonstrate how this can be achieved in practice (see Table 2 for summary).

### **Challenges relating to communicable diseases**

#### *ANTIMICROBIAL RESISTANCE*

In few areas of clinical practice is the integration of public health principles with clinical practice more necessary than in tackling resistance of bacteria to antimicrobials. Common bacteria are increasingly resistant to antibiotics, damaging the capability of health systems to cope with infectious disease and threatening patient safety (Davies, 2011). As stewards of NHS resources, hospital physicians are well placed to strike the right balance between prescribing the right antibiotics when indicated, whilst reducing unnecessary use that threatens the capability of hospitals to effectively treat patients who develop infections.

Inappropriate prescribing of antibiotics is implicated in antimicrobial resistance (AMR) and can contribute to a range of healthcare-associated harms such as *Clostridium difficile* infection, with disastrous consequences both for patients and hospital resources (Charani E, 2011). In England, a national surveillance study conducted between 2010 and 2013 showed a 6.5% increase in antimicrobial prescribing in that time, including a 12% increase in prescribing for

hospital inpatients (Public Health England, 2014). Importantly, a large proportion of these may be prescribed inappropriately, including an estimated 8.8% in primary care settings (Smieszek T, 2018). Similarly, in the United States, up to a third of antibiotics used in outpatient settings may be prescribed inappropriately (Fleming-Dutra, 2016).

Reducing inappropriate prescribing is a complex behavioural challenge that is frequently the target of evidence-based interventions in clinical settings (Charani E, 2011). For example, hospital AMR prevention programmes often aim to reduce overuse of antibiotics through promotion of narrow-spectrum prescribing (NICE, 2015). Such counter-cultural interventions are often extremely challenging to implement successfully, requiring strong leadership skills and appreciation of the multiple influences on physician behaviour to be effective (NICE, 2015). However, by combining practical experience of the factors that influence behaviour change among physicians with their position as clinical leaders, hospital doctors are well placed to lead improvements in prescribing practice, influencing local culture to enhance the effectiveness of hospital-wide interventions.

Similarly, awareness of local epidemiology and resistance patterns can empower physicians to ‘narrow the spectrum’ for common infections such as pneumonia, urinary tract infections and cellulitis (Elias, et al., 2017; Patel PK, 2017). Such efforts afford clinicians the opportunity to combine the application of multiple public health principles – prevention, evidence-based practice and system stewardship – to slow the growth of resistance in their local communities and contribute to the preservation of antimicrobial effectiveness. In this way, clinicians can have impact on an important public health challenge whilst improving quality of care, including the effectiveness of their clinical practice.

#### *INFLUENZA AND INVASIVE INFECTIONS*

Hospital doctors have a particularly important role in protecting and improving health among vulnerable groups. For example, pandemic flu is often cited as an inevitable threat of globalisation, and seasonal flu outbreaks are a consistent feature of the annual NHS ‘winter crisis’ (Guardian, 2018). As clinicians, ensuring flu vaccinations are available and prescribed for vulnerable groups such as pregnant women, children, patients with pre-existing chronic disease and older people is a simple and effective way to mitigate health inequalities related to the impact of flu, with potential to reduce excess winter deaths (Public Health England, 2013). Additionally, providing vaccines for people with caring responsibilities – including healthcare workers - is a small task that can be disproportionately beneficial for society (World Health Organization, 2012). Hospital doctors have an opportunity to lead by example in this

area by taking up the flu vaccine themselves and arranging provision for their colleagues, protecting patients and building local resilience against flu.

Similarly, clinicians are well placed to combat the impacts of common infections that cluster in vulnerable populations. For example, the outbreak of invasive group A streptococcus *emm* type 66 among people who inject drugs in England and Wales resulted in many preventable hospital admissions among rough sleepers (Bundle, et al., 2017). Hospital clinicians played a key role by working with local microbiology and health protection colleagues to identify and treat linked cases, contributing to local epidemiological investigation and preventive interventions among homeless populations to control the outbreak.

## **Challenges relating to non-communicable diseases**

### *THE GROWING BURDEN OF PREVENTABLE CHRONIC DISEASE*

Failure to slow the growth of preventable long-term conditions is a key challenge for all health systems. For example, 63% of adults were classed as being overweight or obese in England in 2015 (Public Health England, 2017) and in the UK, prevalence of diabetes is estimated to rise from 3.5 million currently to 5 million by 2025 (Diabetes.co.uk, 2018). Preventable conditions are already significantly impacting NHS resources and will continue to do so in the absence of transformational change in health system approaches to prevention.

Clinicians can play an important role in the prevention of chronic disease by providing evidence-based interventions that support behaviour change in their patients, particularly by focusing on the major risk factors for preventable disease and death – smoking, unhealthy diet, harmful drinking and insufficient physical activity. Research has shown that risk factors for preventable disease tend to cluster in populations, i.e. a large proportion of adults do not follow any national guidance on tobacco, diet, alcohol or physical activity (King's Fund, 2018). However, the effectiveness of brief advice and very brief advice as interventions to support behaviour change is well established (NICE, 2010; NICE, 2013; NICE, 2018). It is important that physicians do not deprioritise these activities because they have potential to positively impact population health when delivered at scale.

One public health challenge to which this particularly applies and on which physicians are well placed to act is smoking among hospital patients; by supporting behaviour change among smokers, clinicians can improve population health whilst reducing health inequalities. Approximately 1 in 4 hospital beds in England is occupied by a smoker, but fewer than 1 in 13

patients who smoke are referred to hospital or community-based smoking cessation services (British Thoracic Society, 2016). Supporting patients to stop smoking is likely to be most successful when advice to quit is underpinned by access to evidence-based cessation services, and hospital doctors can play an important leadership role by advocating for the provision of such services in their local communities and healthcare systems (King's Fund, 2018).

Central to enabling the NHS to meet the challenge of preventable disease is therefore the extent to which clinicians see 'prevention' as a core clinical responsibility; as hospital resources become increasingly stretched by the impacts of preventable disease and funding challenges, it will become increasingly important that physicians provide leadership to embed this culture within their hospitals and wider healthcare systems.

#### *MULTIMORBIDITY AND POLYPHARMACY*

Ageing populations, advances in medical technology and improving life expectancy mean that multimorbidity and its related problems are defining challenges for all health systems. In the UK, the number of people living with three or more long term conditions was predicted to increase from 1.9 million in 2008 to 2.9 million this year (Department of Health, 2014), with massive implications for the pattern of acute medical admissions and how patients are cared for in hospital.

The related challenge of polypharmacy is associated with increased side effects, adverse drug reactions, and unacceptable treatment burdens for patients (NICE, 2017). Between 2006 and 2016, there was an almost 50% increase in total community prescriptions in England and per capita prescriptions increased from 14.8 to 20 in that time, suggesting a general increase in prescribing nationally (NHS Digital, 2017).

By incorporating the principle of stewardship of resources into everyday clinical practice, physicians are uniquely placed to lead organisational responses to challenges related to multimorbidity. For example, polypharmacy is often appropriate and rational, resulting from prescription of multiple medications for discrete indications, and physicians play a key role in the monitoring and prevention of harms. However, the evidence for prescribing multiple medications simultaneously is frequently uncertain and often based on studies of 'clean' patient populations that exclude both multimorbid and elderly patients (NICE, 2017). The result is that physicians are often in a position of managing patients to whom the best available evidence may not apply. By adopting a 'shared decision-making' approach to clinical decision-

making, and deprescribing unnecessary or unwanted medications in the context of individual patient preferences, doctors can model ‘system stewardship’ in a way that both benefits patients and makes better use of the scarce resources of the NHS (Mathew & McGowan, 2016).

Importantly, there is evidence that multimorbidity and polypharmacy are also more prevalent among those living in the most deprived communities (Barnett, et al., 2012) Therefore, efforts by clinicians to address these challenges have the potential to mitigate health inequalities at a population level as well as improve the care of individual patients.

## **The future role of hospital doctors in improving population health**

Globalisation is revealing new and interconnected challenges that are already impacting how medicine is practised in all health systems. The economic, social and technological progress which drove the demographic shift from infectious to chronic disease is increasingly challenged by emerging phenomena such as antimicrobial resistance, meaning communicable and non-communicable diseases frequently co-exist. As clinical leaders in their institutions, hospital doctors are well placed to lead health system responses to the emerging public health challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As discussed in the examples above, they will be aided in doing so by seeking to integrate public health principles into their everyday clinical practice, improving quality of care whilst making valuable contributions to improving health at a population level.

### **Key points**

- Historically, physicians have made outstanding contributions to improving population health through the delivery of healthcare.
- Improving quality of care and advancing public health objectives are mutually reinforcing, because healthcare remains a key determinant of health outcomes at a population level.
- However, to maximise their effectiveness in the delivery of care, hospital doctors increasingly require a population perspective to their clinical practice.
- Emerging clinical and public health challenges such as antimicrobial resistance and multimorbidity require frontline clinicians to rethink how they practice medicine;

physicians will increasingly need to think in terms of prevention, stewardship of resources and addressing social determinants of health.

- Hospital doctors are well placed to continue to lead the advancement of public health objectives by integrating public health principles into routine clinical practice, improving both quality of care and population health.

## Table 1. Domains of public health practice

The UK Faculty of Public Health (FPH) identify 3 ‘domains’ of public health, which summarise the scope of the professional practice of public health (Faculty of Public Health, 2010).

Domain	Key areas of practice	Examples of public health practice
Health protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preventing harm from infectious diseases.</li> <li>• Preventing harm from environmental hazards, e.g. chemicals and poisons.</li> <li>• Emergency preparedness and response.</li> <li>• Surveillance and monitoring of infectious diseases.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning for pandemic flu.</li> <li>• Response to major incidents with health implications, e.g. chemical weapon attacks.</li> <li>• Epidemiological investigation of infectious disease outbreaks, e.g. Hepatitis A, MRSA.</li> </ul>
Health improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addressing health inequalities.</li> <li>• Addressing social determinants of health, e.g. education, housing, employment.</li> <li>• Enabling behaviour change around modifiable risk factors, e.g. smoking, diet.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health needs assessment of local homeless population, to inform service planning.</li> <li>• Evaluation of preventive interventions, e.g. local diabetes prevention programme.</li> <li>• Implementation of local strategy to tackle childhood obesity.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Surveillance and monitoring of burden of chronic disease.</li> </ul>	
Healthcare public health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improving the effectiveness, efficiency and value of health services.</li> <li>Improving quality and safety of care.</li> <li>Analysing and addressing unwarranted variation.</li> <li>Service planning and commissioning</li> <li>Audit and service evaluation.</li> <li>Clinical governance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analysis of causes of unwarranted variation, e.g. NHS atlas of variation.</li> <li>Leading evidence-based commissioning of prevention services, e.g. an integrated prediabetes pathway.</li> <li>Analysis of spending and outcomes to improve value and efficiency of services, e.g. using a spend and outcome tool to inform local resource allocation.</li> </ul>

**Table 2. Examples of application of public health principles in clinical practice**

Clinical challenge	Relevant public health principle(s)	Examples of behaviours in scope of clinical practice
Antimicrobial resistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evidence-based practice</li> <li>• Prevention</li> <li>• System stewardship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid prescribing unnecessary antibiotics (e.g. For asymptomatic bacteriuria and upper respiratory tract infections).</li> <li>• Practise and promote narrow-spectrum prescribing.</li> <li>• Provide clinical leadership for local antibiotic stewardship programmes and policies.</li> </ul>
Threats from seasonal and pandemic influenza	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evidence-based practice</li> <li>• Prevention</li> <li>• Reducing health inequalities</li> <li>• System stewardship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prescribe flu vaccines for vulnerable groups.</li> <li>• Provide clinical leadership for vaccination programmes and campaigns.</li> </ul>
Burden of preventable chronic disease	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evidence-based practice</li> <li>• Prevention</li> <li>• Addressing social determinants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide health promotion and brief advice for behavioural risk factors.</li> <li>• Refer for evidence-based interventions, e.g. smoking cessation.</li> <li>• Explore opportunities for social prescribing.</li> </ul>
Multimorbidity and polypharmacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evidence-based practice</li> <li>• Prevention</li> <li>• Reducing health inequalities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empower patients by practising shared decision-making.</li> <li>• Deprescribe unnecessary</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• System stewardship</li> </ul>	medications wherever possible.
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