

Approaches to population health care: The emerging context!

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This paper provides a review of recent developments in population-based approaches to community health and explores the origins of the population health concept and its implications for the operation of health service management. There is a growing perception among health professionals that the key to improving health outcomes will be the implementation of integrated and preventive population-based resource management rather than investment in systems that respond to crises and health problems at the acute end of the service provision spectrum only. That is, we will need increasingly to skew our community health and welfare investments towards preventive care, education, lifestyle change, self-management and environmental improvement if we are to reduce the rate of growth in the incidence of chronic disease and mitigate the impact of these diseases upon the acute health care system. While resources will still need to be devoted to the treatment and management of physical trauma, infectious diseases, inherited illness and chronic conditions, it is suggested we could reduce the rate at which demand for these services is increasing at present by managing our environment and communities better, and through the implementation of more effective early intervention programs across particular population groups. Such approaches are known generally as population health management, as opposed to individual or illness-based health management—or even public health—and suggest that health systems might productively focus in the future on population level causation and not just upon disease-specific problems or illness management after the fact. Population health approaches attempt to broaden our understanding of causation and manage health through an emphasis on the health of whole populations and by building healthy communities rather than seeing “health care” as predominantly about illness management or responses to health crises. The concept also presupposes the existence of cleaner and healthier environments, clean water and food, and the existence of vibrant social contexts in which individuals are able to work for the overall good of communities and, ultimately, of each other.

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