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EDITORIALS

## Health Promotion, Health Protection, and Disease Prevention: Challenges and Opportunities in a Dynamic Landscape



Rosemary M. Caron, PhD,<sup>1</sup> Kimberly Noel, MPH,<sup>2</sup> Rachael N. Reed, DPH,<sup>3</sup> Jamie Sibel, MPH,<sup>4</sup> Hunter J. Smith, MPH<sup>5</sup>

Public health aims to promote health, protect population health, and prevent disease and injury through the core functions of assessment, policy development, and assurance.<sup>1</sup> These public health actions, at various governmental and community levels, have helped manage complex health challenges globally. Specifically, health promotion is a collective strategy that creates the right social and physical conditions individually, institutionally, and societally to improve the determinants of health and empower individuals to improve their health by increasing their control over the factors that influence health and does not focus resources solely on treatment.<sup>2</sup> The development of positive health policies, expansion of collective efficacy in the community, and the progression of a health literate citizenry are actions by which to implement health promotion.<sup>2</sup> Health protection relies on the expertise and collaboration of governmental agencies as well as public health and healthcare systems to identify, mitigate, and prevent health threats to populations.<sup>3</sup> Disease prevention also has the desired outcome of attaining a healthy population, but efforts are focused on averting specific morbidities.<sup>4</sup> Health promotion, health protection, and disease prevention serve as 3 interconnected constructs to fulfill the public health mission, which is ultimately to ensure that populations are healthy and achieve positive states of well-being.<sup>5</sup>

The effectiveness of these constructs is evidenced by the historical initiatives (e.g., Alma Ata Declaration), health equity initiatives (e.g., Healthy People 2030), and the greatest public health achievements of the twentieth century, which have contributed to a lengthening of the average lifespan by 25 years.<sup>6,7</sup> Yet, ongoing challenges persist or continue to emerge, such as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, which has reduced

gains in life expectancy globally.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic illuminated the already existing health and social disparities that disproportionately impact marginalized populations because of significantly challenging upstream determinants.<sup>9</sup>

### HEALTH PROMOTION

The breadth of health promotion activities includes systemic regulatory, political, educational, and organizational actions that result in conditions conducive to individuals, groups, and communities.<sup>10</sup> The pandemic has had lasting, albeit not uniform, effects on health promotion behaviors as evidenced by an increase in obesity incidence, notably for children during school closures and social distancing policies.<sup>11</sup> Disparities exist not only for health outcomes, but also for health promoting activities, such as physical activity, in which gaps have widened substantially between various populations, such as men and women, racial and ethnic groups, rich and poor persons, and people with different levels of educational attainment.<sup>12</sup>

From the <sup>1</sup>School of Healthcare Leadership, Massachusetts General Hospital, Institute of Health Professions, Boston, Massachusetts; <sup>2</sup>Family, Population and Preventive Medicine, Renaissance School of Medicine, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, New York; <sup>3</sup>School of Population and Health Sciences, Dillard University, New Orleans, Louisiana; <sup>4</sup>University of Maryland Preventive Medicine Program, Baltimore, Maryland; and <sup>5</sup>Global Emerging Infections Surveillance Branch, Armed Forces Health Surveillance Division, Silver Spring, Maryland

Address correspondence to: Rosemary M. Caron, PhD, MGH Institute of Health Professions, School of Healthcare Leadership, Charlestown Navy Yard, 36 1st Avenue, Boston, MA 02129. E-mail: [rcaron@mghihp.edu](mailto:rcaron@mghihp.edu).

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## HEALTH PROTECTION

Health protection focuses on safeguarding the health of populations against external threats via governmental policies, regulations, and laws. It is a responsibility of municipal, state, and federal governmental agencies to assure access to quality, accessible, and affordable health care. Governments occupy a unique position in stewarding health through policies and decisions that shape not only health delivery directly but also promote health and well-being via economic, environmental, and societal frameworks.<sup>13</sup> One of the essential factors that could potentially influence health protection will be how the electorate and governments evolve in directing public health goals based on societal and ethical values, as well as the management of conflicting public health guidance and communication.<sup>14,15</sup>

## DISEASE PREVENTION

Disease prevention efforts identify and assess health risks and develop and test interventions aimed at reducing harmful exposure, disease onset, and progression across all life stages, populations, and conditions.<sup>16</sup> However, views promoting individual liberty and opposing mass restrictive measures, other than the focused protection of high-risk older demographics, are often deemed unfair to less vulnerable individuals, thus complicating disease prevention efforts.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, the notion of equality and utility, where restrictive measures are universally applied to achieve the greatest reduction of morbidity and mortality for the entire population, have also been championed.<sup>18</sup> These ideological differences manifest a new world of public health policy for disease prevention whereby the scope of public health restrictions greatly depend on shared ethics and values. [Table 1](#) highlights examples of health promotion, health protection, and disease prevention.

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Concurrent with the complex role of government in public health management is the evolving challenge of

misinformation and disinformation. In response, public health leaders have prioritized novel partnerships with social media and search engine platforms to fight an infodemic of misinformation that poses significant risk to effective public health communication.<sup>19</sup> Along with the rise in misinformation, discrepancies in federal and state presentations of important health data contribute to serious communication problems within government systems.<sup>20</sup>

Another challenge is disparate access to health care. Barriers such as lack of transportation, employment requirements, and geographical distance can restrict healthcare access.<sup>21</sup> COVID-19 deepened the already pervasive digital divide, resulting in imbalances applying health-related technologies, where those with access to telehealth greatly benefit in chronic disease management.<sup>22,23</sup>

Opportunities exist to strengthen public health response in health promotion, health protection, and disease prevention. First, by collaborating with and empowering our most vulnerable and underserved communities, these constructs can promote health equity and tackle health disparities across a variety of measures. For example, by focusing efforts on the social determinants of health; integrating health equity education in medical school curricula; and increasing collaboration efforts among communities, the public health sector, and medical professionals, we can promote health by empowering communities to live healthier, prevent disease through holistic care and addressing underlying causes, and protect health by exerting available government tools.<sup>21,24</sup>

Second, there has been an unfortunate erosion of public confidence and trust among health authorities because of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>25</sup> Health promotion, health protection, and disease prevention implementation offer actionable ways through which health authorities can win back the trust of their communities. By integrating community stakeholders, engaging in transparent and genuine relationship building, and creating sustainable, community-driven plans, health authorities can garner community buy-in and trust as

**Table 1.** Definitions and Examples of Health Promotion, Health Protection, and Disease Prevention

| Levels of prevention  | Health promotion                                                                                      | Health protection                                                                | Disease prevention                                                                        |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Definition            | Encouragement of activities that facilitate healthy living and well-being                             | Safeguarding the public's health against external threats                        | Assessment of health risks and development of interventions that halt disease progression |
| Example interventions | Primal and primordial prevention<br>- Physical activity guidelines<br>- High-quality and safe housing | Primary prevention<br>- Emergency preparedness<br>- Communicable disease control | Secondary prevention<br>- Cancer and other disease screenings<br>- Chemoprophylaxis       |

well as demonstrate the power of prevention and public health to those who are skeptical.

Health promotion, health protection, and disease prevention cover a broad scope of public health concepts that can be applied clinically, in organizations, within communities, and by government entities. When used at each of these strata, they can be powerful tools for improving the health and well-being of individuals and the overall population.

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