

What is Health?

A Discussion of the Multiple Determinants of Health

While in our medical training, we often think about being healthy as "free of disease". However, being a healthy person encompasses so much more than being without disease. Health often also translates as "ability to function". The World Health Organization defines health as "complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or injury." This definition is very similar to Webster's dictionary, "state of being sound in mind and body."

When defined in this manner, it becomes somewhat obvious that what determines whether or not a person is healthy depends upon many factors, not just simply medical care. The following model has been proposed to identify and relate the multiple determinants of health:

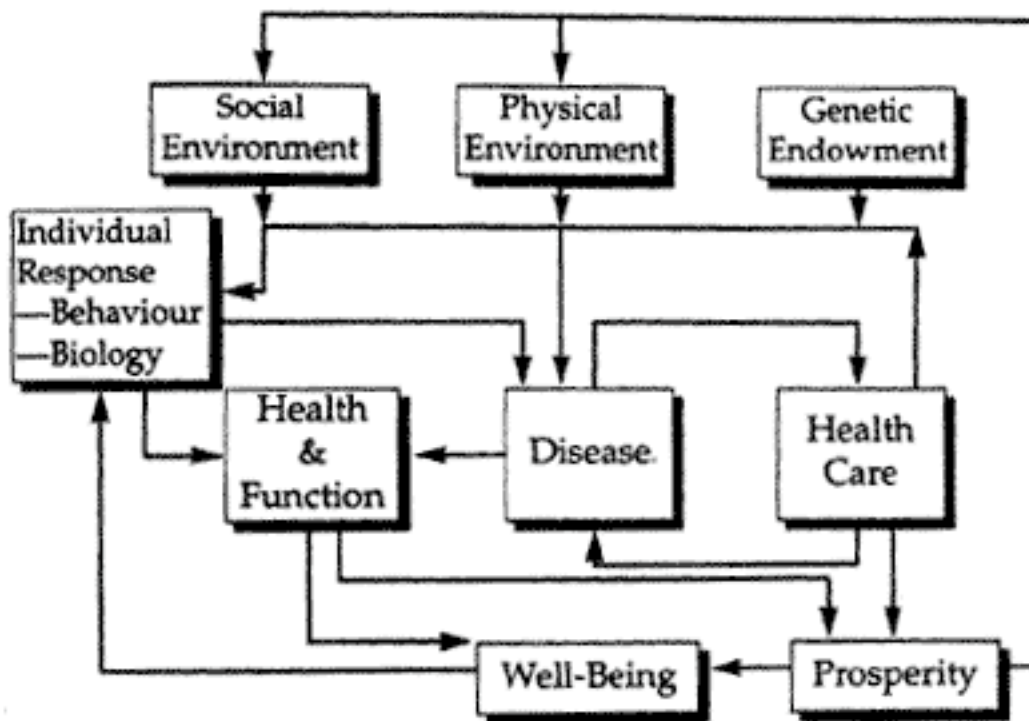


FIG. 3. Multiple determinants of health model.

Meeting the Challenges of Caring for the Underserved

This model (referred to as the Evan's model) reminds us that health and functioning are separate entities from disease, yet interrelated. Also, in describing the multiple determinants of health, health care is only one of several important determinants.

Some determinants are not particularly amenable to change or improvement. For example, it is not possible (at this time) to change a person's genetic endowment. With regard to disease, we are very accustomed to the idea of eradicating disease as the main purpose of medical care. However, if our ideal goal as physicians is to produce health, we will need to examine the other determinants more closely and identify ways that we might impact beyond health care. In fact, it has been suggested that the improvements in life expectancy and health over the last 2 centuries are minimally related to health care (antibiotics, scientific discoveries, technology) and are primarily due to change in other determinants (physical environment–sanitation and social environment–public health services).

Additionally, many of the diseases responsible for loss of health today have, at their roots, a social or environmental cause. Thus, before we can produce more health by reducing these diseases, we are forced to examine the social and environmental roots of such diseases. For example, accidents are the leading killer of children in the United States. We will need to address the social (lack of supervision) and environmental (safe access to playgrounds) determinants which contribute to this loss of health in our society.

* Graphic reproduced from the book: Evans, R., M. Barer, and T. Marmor. 1994. *Why Are Some People Health and Others Not? The Determinants of Health of Populations*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.