

Reflections: Health Promotion— What Is It?

by David F. Duncan, DrPH and Robert S. Gold, PhD, DrPH

The term health promotion has gained wide popularity in recent years. This widespread usage has been accompanied by a wide diversity of definitions. Some of this diversity may be seen in the articles which make up this theme issue on health promotion.

In many cases health promotion seems to have become an all-inclusive umbrella term under which any health service may find coverage. Health services have become health promotion services; outpatient clinics have become health promotion centers. In these cases, "health promotion" has become a fad or a gimmick—as mean-

ingless as labelling certain cereals and other foods as "natural."

Others use health promotion as an umbrella term but of more limited scope. Perhaps the most popular of these is Green's definition of health promotion as, "any combination of educational, organizational, economic and environmental supports for behavior conducive to health."¹ Much that is to be found in this theme issue derives from this conceptualization of health promotion as all of the means by which healthy behavior may be encouraged.

A variant on the above has been the definition of health promotion as any non-educational intervention designed to facilitate behavioral adaptations conducive to health. In other words, this version divides the lifestyle approach to health into two categories: health education methods and health promotion methods. After a brief period of popularity, this conceptualization seems to have largely disappeared from the scene. Like Green's definition above, it did have the merit of emphasizing that education is not the only means by which desirable health behavior

change can be brought about.

A further variant on the usage of health promotion as a limited umbrella term is to be found in Mullen's article in this special issue. Mullen proposed that health promotion is made up of two components: disease prevention and wellness. Certainly this conceptualization is consistent with the content of some of the most outstanding health promotion projects existing today.

The oldest use of the term health promotion is to use it as one of two elements which make up primary prevention: specific protection and health promotion. Specific protection referred to measures aimed at the prevention of a particular disease or group of diseases, such as vaccination for measles or insecticide spraying to prevent malaria and yellow fever. Health promotion was used to refer to interventions which were not disease-specific but which generally improved the population's resistance to disease or reduced their exposure to potential

David F. Duncan, DrPH, is Professor of Health Education at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale; and Robert S. Gold, PhD, DrPH, is Director of the School Health Initiative, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, US Department of Health and Human Services.

Reprint requests should be addressed to David F. Duncan, DrPH, Department of Health Education, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901.

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agents of disease—such as improved nutrition and water purification.

Another traditional usage of the term has the advantage of being rooted, as none of the preceding seem to be, in the simple meaning of the words which make up the term. The WHO, in their constitution define health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity," is taken together with promotion which comes from the Latin root word "promovere," meaning to advance or to move forward. To promote something is to contribute to the growth, enlargement or excellence of it. Thus, health promotion contributes to the growth, enlargement or excellence of health. Health promotion, "focuses on improving the quality of life and well-being, not merely averting pathology."² One further elaboration would be that in this view, health promotion is a process or collection of activities whose end is high level wellness.³

This concept of health promotion can be seen as a part of a broader conceptualization of the full spectrum of health services and activities. This broad spectrum is divided into three areas: health promotion, health maintenance and health restoration. Health promotion includes all activities aimed at apparently

healthy individuals or populations with the intent of contributing to the growth, enlargement or excellence of their health—of achieving high level wellness. Health maintenance includes all activities aimed at apparently healthy individuals or populations with the intent of keeping them healthy; in other words, the prevention of disease whether by specific or general means. Finally, health restoration includes all activities aimed at ill individuals or populations with the hope of restoring them to a positive state of health.

If such a broad conceptualization of health service purposes, based on the simple meanings of the root words, were to be widely adopted, we might not only gain an end to confusion about the term health promotion, but also gain a clearer perspective from which to examine health policy in all areas.

References

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