



WHAT IS PUBLIC HEALTH?

*Basic definitions, history, and activities, as prepared by the
AMA-MSS Ad Hoc Committee on Public Health*



DEFINITIONS

- Public health aims to **“fulfill society’s interest in assuring conditions in which people can be healthy”**¹
- Medical services are directed towards individuals, while **public health services** are focused on **populations**
- Built on principles of **social justice** and equity, the overall goal of public health is to **create healthier communities**

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE²

- Even in primitive times, healthcare was divided into two distinct but overlapping roles
 - **Healers** – care for the sick (modern-day physicians)
 - **Health Protectors** – protect the community, e.g, led people to locations with better food supply (modern-day public health practitioners)
- In the **19th century**, public health was **focused on infectious disease**: cholera, polio, smallpox, etc.
- Current efforts continue to battle infectious diseases, but also include **chronic disease management, health promotion, and disease prevention**

PUBLIC HEALTH HAS MANY ROLES³

- **Monitor health status** to identify and solve community health problems.
- **Diagnose and investigate health problems** and health hazards in the community.
- Inform, educate, and **empower people** about health issues.
- **Mobilize community partnerships** and action to identify and solve health problems.
- **Develop policies and plans** that support individual and community health efforts.
- Enforce **laws and regulations** that protect health and ensure safety.
- **Link people** to needed personal health services and assure the provision of health care when otherwise unavailable.
- Assure **competent public and personal health care workforce**.
- **Evaluate** effectiveness, accessibility, and quality of personal and population-based health services.
- **Research** for new insights and innovative solutions to health problems.



1. “What is Public Health.” Available at <http://www.whatispublichealth.org/what/index.html>. Accessed 10/22/06.

2. Introduction to Health Services, UCLA School of Public Health. Lester Breslow, M.D., M.P.H., Professor Emeritus and Dean Emeritus, School of Public Health, former President of the American Public Health Association.

3. “CDC: The Essential Public Health Services.” Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/od/ocphp/nphsp/EssentialPHServices.htm>. Accessed 10/27/06.