What is meant by population health—and why it matters

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As health care evolves, so, too, does the information available to physicians and trainees. This is evident in the rising prevalence of population health management, which focuses on health outcomes for a group of individuals rather than a single patient.

With across the board health outcomes becoming a more significant metric in health care, the concept has taken on new importance.

With that, what is expected of a physician has changed, said Paul George, MD, MPHE, assistant dean for medical education and associate professor of family medicine at the Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University.

“And now as a physician, to better health care systems, you are asked to be responsible for not only the patient in front of you, but also the population of patients,” Dr. George said.

Population health in med ed

Having spent nearly three decades in academic medicine, David B. Nash, MD—the dean of Thomas Jefferson University’s college of population health—is aware of its shortfalls. That was never more apparent to him than when he looked at the curriculum his daughter encountered when she began her career as a medical student. It was, Dr. Nash said, “exactly the same” as his own more than three decades ago.

“Not every university has a college of population health. I get it,” Dr. Nash said. “But America’s 147 allopathic medical schools need to retool the factory floor for the future, so changing med ed is part of that retooling. Historically, we’ve built a rear-wheel drive, gas-guzzling car for a marketplace that wants a Tesla. That is the change that medical education is going through.”
That shift is underway, and schools within the AMA’s Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium are leading the way in making it happen.

One example: A student-driven program at the University of North Carolina is aiming to cut health care costs and improve the quality of care provided to some of the most vulnerable patients, and it is using compassion as a primary tool to help accomplish those objectives.

The topic is addressed in detail in the “Population Health” chapter in *Health Systems Science*, a 2016 textbook that is the first to explore the “third pillar” of medical education.

**Changing care**

Population health allows physicians to address some of the shortcomings in the U.S. health care system, which spends a higher percentage of its gross domestic product on health care than other nations, yet lags others when it comes to life expectancy and prevention of chronic diseases.

The population health approach helps by:

- Focusing on wellness instead of sick care.
- Using data more effectively to improve care.
- Engaging patients in their care.
- Coordinating care that was previously siloed and fragmented, something that is easier to do as accountable care organizations and patient-centered medical homes have evolved.

An education module, “Population Health,” offered via the AMA Ed Hub™ helps medical students—and residents and physicians who may not have received training during their medical school years—understand this shift toward population health and learn how they can take part in moving it ahead. The module is part of the Health Systems Science Learning Series.

The AMA Ed Hub is an online platform that consolidates all the high-quality CME, maintenance of certification, and educational content you need—in one place—with activities relevant to you, automated credit tracking and reporting for some states and specialty boards.