

Role and Training

Description of Role and Training

Community Health Worker

Community Health Workers (CHW) can be broadly defined as individuals who connect health care consumers and providers, promoting health particularly among groups who have traditionally lacked access to care. CHWs are members of the communities within which they work, and they play an important role in identifying a community's problems and developing innovative solutions. Examples of successful uses of CHWs include: using ex-addicts to educate intravenous drug users about AIDS risks, increasing breast and cervical cancer screening in minority communities, and undertaking community-based pre-natal intervention strategies.

CHWs play critical roles in improving community health status by providing essential cultural and technical linkages between community members, primary care providers, and the larger health care delivery system. Training ranges from weeks to months and usually combines lectures with supervised field experiences. There is no national organization representing CHWs, and there is no scope of practice laws specific to CHWs. Despite their usefulness in many health care settings, CHWs have not been widely incorporated into mainstream health care due to the parochial nature of medicine, questions about legal status, role definition, and training.

Health Services Manager/Policy Maker

The Health Services Manager is a Master's program which prepares students for careers that can include managing a hospital, ambulatory care clinic, or an integrated health services system; participating in health policy analysis; providing marketing, financial, or information services support to health care organizations; or becoming a licensed long-term care administrator.

Health services administrators are responsible for overseeing the operation and management of health care facilities. In smaller facilities or agencies, administrators are responsible for the overall direction and financial management of the institution or agency. In larger facilities, health service administrators supervise all assistant and deputy administrators. Administrators may have a great deal of direct contact with patients or it may be limited, depending on the type of facility.

Nurse

Vocational or practical nurses receive up to 12 months of basic nursing skills training. Students are often recent high school graduates. Licensed Practical Nurses (LPN) are considered "nurse technicians" and practice under the supervision of a registered nurse or physician. They must pass a national licensing examination to become LPNs. They are able to administer most medications, perform simple dressing changes and other, more technical skills with additional training.

Registered nurses (RN) may be educated at either the diploma, associate or bachelor level. Most associate degree programs are at community colleges, can accommodate part-time students, and are completed within two to three years. Bachelor-prepared nurses complete a four-year program, typically with the first two years of course work devoted to the sciences and the last two years devoted to nursing courses and clinical training. Graduates of both types of programs must take a licensing examination to become (RNs). Bachelor-prepared nurses are more commonly found in supervisory positions.

Nursing staff provide essential services in community clinics and provide home based services with private agencies. Public health nurses typically are involved in home-based care of complex patients and provide a wide range of preventive services, such as immunizations, at community based clinics.

Nurse Practitioner

Nurse Practitioners (NPs) are predominantly Masters prepared nurses who have completed 1-2 years of additional education following a Bachelors degree in nursing. Traditionally, NPs were educated in a specific area, such as pediatrics, adult, women's health or geriatrics. Increasingly, NP students are choosing to study in family-based programs, which emphasize comprehensive care for clients of all ages. The NP curriculum is based on theoretical constructs from nursing and medicine including course work in pharmacology, physiology, pathophysiology, epidemiology, health assessment, diagnosis, clinical decision-making, and management. As part of their education, NP students also receive intensive clinical experiences. Students receive an average of 600 supervised clinical hours in their practice area. (NONPF, 1996).

The nurse practitioner is a skilled health care provider who utilizes critical judgment in the performance of comprehensive health assessments, differential diagnosis, and the prescribing of pharmacologic and non-pharmacologic treatments in the direct management of acute and chronic illness and disease. Nurse practitioner practice promotes wellness and prevents illness and injury. Nurse practitioners function in various settings for individuals, families, and communities. This includes working autonomously and in interdisciplinary teams as resources and consultants. The role may include conducting research providing education, and impacting public policy. (ANA Scope and Standards of advanced practice registered nursing, 1996).

The Nurse Practitioner functions under Professional Standards of Practice developed by the American Nurses Association.

Physical Therapist

Physical Therapists (PTs) are professionally educated at the college or university level and are required to be licensed in the state(s) in which they practice. Beginning in 2001, only post-baccalaureate education programs will be accredited. PTs also may obtain clinical specialist certification.

In general, the PT professional education curriculum has four component parts and requires between 2 and 3 years to complete. These are the basic sciences, such as anatomy and physiology; the clinical sciences, such as PT assessment and intervention; leadership, management and professional courses, such as principles of practice; and clinical education.

PTs practice in a broad range of inpatient, outpatient and community settings, including the following: hospitals, outpatient clinics, private offices, skilled nursing homes, school systems, workplaces, athletic facilities and fitness centers. The requirement for physician supervision of PT services varies from state to state. PTs care for people throughout the life span, as well as along the continuum from wellness and prevention to injury and rehabilitation.

Physical therapy includes examinations to determine a diagnosis and prognosis and plan an intervention; the alleviation of impairment and functional limitations; and the prevention of injury, impairment, functional limitation, and disability.

Physician

Physician training begins with a bachelor's degree from a four-year college or university. Students may choose any major, although they must take required "pre-med" classes in chemistry, biology, physics, and mathematics. Medical school typically consists of two years of course work followed by two years of clinical experience. Course work emphasizes pathophysiology, recognition of signs and symptoms of disease, and application of scientific method to the understanding of disease. Classes also include training in patient interviewing skills and in physical examination.

The clinical years include required clerkships in internal medicine, surgery, obstetrics/gynecology, pediatrics, psychiatry, neurology, and family medicine. Elective clerkships include more advanced work in areas of specialization such as cardiology and oncology. Clerkships are predominantly hospital-based (although there is an increasing emphasis on ambulatory care experiences), and students develop assessment and patient management skills. Students are taught about disease risk factors and disease prevention but receive little formal training in patient education.

After graduation, MDs go on to intensive post-graduate residency training, which lasts at least 3 years. Interns typically work 60 to 80-hour weeks, take over night call, and admit patients to the hospital. Sub-specialists may complete up to 5 or 8 years of post-graduate training. Sub-specialists may complete up to a total of 8 years of post-graduate training. Some specialties require periodic re-certification. The amount of required continuing education varies by specialty.

Physician Assistant

Physician Assistants (PAs) practice medicine with the supervision of licensed physicians. As members of the health care team, PAs provide a broad range of medical services. They are educated in one of 107 specially designed 2-year programs located at medical

colleges and universities, teaching hospitals, and through the Armed Forces. The first year is based on classroom learning of the basic and medical sciences, while the second year is spent predominantly in clinical rotations. The typical PA student has a bachelor's degree and over 4 years of health care experience prior to admission to the PA program. After graduation, PAs must pass a national certifying examination.

Although physician assistants and nurse practitioners overlap in many skills and functions, differences include a medical vs. nursing orientation to health care.

Public Health Specialist (MPH, MHA, MHSA, MS, DrPH, PhD, ScD)

Public health degrees are granted at the undergraduate, master's and doctoral levels. Multiple degree programs exist for graduate students interested in studying public health. Most master's programs are two years in length, however there are also accelerated programs, distance learning programs, and programs for part-time students who are also working. Many schools of public health either require or strongly recommend some type of work experience before enrollment and most encourage their students to seek summer employment which will further develop and enrich their public health background. Some public health degrees will include coursework across public health disciplines whereas others are more specialized and focused on a specific topic or focus such as a Masters in Health Administration. Some public health degrees are considered to be professional degrees whereas others are academic degrees. Professional degrees (e.g., MPH, DrPH, and MHA) are generally geared towards students who want to pursue careers as practitioners of public health (e.g., in community-based organizations, consulting firms, health departments, federal or international agencies, managed care organizations, hospitals, etc.). Academic degrees (e.g., MS, PhD, or ScD) are oriented more toward students who are seeking academic or research careers rather than public health practice. Dual degrees are very common in public health; many health professionals with advanced degrees in other fields, such as nursing, law, social work, public policy, business, medicine, dentistry, and veterinary medicine, also have master's degrees in public health.

The Association of Schools of Public Health (ASPH), from which much of this text has been extracted¹, represents the nation's accredited schools of public health. ASPH has defined public health practice as a scholarly endeavor that involves "the strategic, organized, and interdisciplinary application of knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary to perform essential public health services and other activities to improve the population's health. Public health practitioners carry out this mission through organized, interdisciplinary efforts that address the physical, mental and environmental health concerns of communities and populations at risk for disease and injury. The public health mission is achieved through the application of health promotion and disease prevention technologies and interventions designed to improve and enhance quality of life, including but not limited to three core public health functions:

- Assessment and monitoring of the health of communities and populations at risk to identify health problems and priorities;

¹ Source: <http://www.asph.org>

- Formulating public policies, in collaboration with community and government leaders, designed to solve identified local and national health problems and priorities;
- Assuring that all populations have access to appropriate and cost-effective care, including health promotion and disease prevention services, and evaluation of the effectiveness of that care

The Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH)² is the nationally recognized accrediting body for both schools of public health and public health programs. There are currently 39 Accredited Schools of Public Health, and six Associate Members. Associate members are programs or schools that intend to become fully accredited schools of public health. Schools of public health are accredited through a rigorous peer-review process. CEPH certification attests to the quality of an educational program and provides assurances that the school or program has been evaluated and has met accepted standards established by and within the profession. Attending an accredited school of public health assures students that each schools' educational programs have been found to be satisfactory by other accredited schools of public health, that advanced doctoral degree opportunities exist, in addition to master's level degrees, that credits are transferable between institutions, and that the degree earned will qualify the graduate for public health jobs, internships and fellowships which specify graduation from an accredited school as a condition of acceptance.

Attendance at CEPH accredited and ASPH member schools also assures students of receiving a well-rounded graduate education in each of the five core public health areas that are essential for a Master's in Public Health (MPH). The five core areas of public health degree training are: **Health Services Administration** (for students seeking careers in administration or resource management in the public or private sectors of health service delivery), **Biostatistics** (where students gain skills in the application of statistical procedures, techniques and methodology to characterize or investigate health problems and programs), **Epidemiology** (which focuses on the systematic study of the distribution and determinants of disease or disability in populations), **Behavioral Sciences/Health Education** (where students gain skills in the design, implementation and evaluation of health promotion and disease prevention interventions to help people choose healthier lifestyles, access or use health services, or adopt self-care practices), and **Environmental Health Sciences** (where students are trained in the identification, and control of factors in the natural or man-made environment such as air, water, land, or housing that affect health).

Once an area of concentration has been chosen, public health students and their advisors develop a course of study geared to the student's individual professional goals, encompassing coursework, a supervised field experience, and a significant program, research or laboratory project that serves as a culminating experience or thesis. Regardless of their specialties, all public health students take introductory courses in biostatistics and epidemiology, and sciences basic to public health. Most schools also require one or more courses in health administration, environmental health and behavioral sciences.

² Source: <http://www.ceph.org>

Other specialty areas of public health include the following: ***International/Global Health*** (for students seeking international careers which encompasses all specializations in public health and focuses on improving health standards in developing countries), ***Biomedical & Laboratory Practice*** (emphasizing basic or laboratory science focused on the diagnosis and treatment of disease and investigation of conditions which affect health status), ***Nutrition*** (focused on the interaction between nutrients, nutrition and health and the application of sound nutritional principles to maintain good health), ***Public Health Practice & Program Management*** (which encompasses training in multiple public health programs and activities such as maternal and child health, aging, mental health, environmental health and professional disciplines such as medicine, dentistry, nursing, social work and other clinical sciences), ***Maternal and Child Health*** (focusing on the complex public health problems affecting women, children, and their families) and ***Occupational Safety & Health*** (concerned with the identification of health and safety hazards related to work and the work environment, as well as their prevention and control).

Distinctions exist between public health and the clinical health professions. While public health is comprised of multiple professional disciplines, and many nurses, physicians, and PAs also have an MPH degree, the primary focus of public health is on entire populations rather than on individual patients. The emphasis is on health promotion and disease prevention for the entire community, rather than on the diagnosis, treatment, and care for the “whole patient” which has been the traditional focus of clinical practice. The public health paradigm employs a spectrum of interventions aimed at the environment, human behavior and lifestyles, as well as medical care systems to promote health and prevent disease whereas the medical paradigm has historically placed a greater emphasis on providing medical care and preventing disease progression for individuals. Inclusion of behavioral and social science tends to be an integral part of public health education (but an elective part of medical education), whereas clinical sciences and service provision are an essential part of medical professional training (but less so for public health). As contrasted with the medical professions where there is a uniform system for certifying specialists beyond professional medical degree, the certification of public health specialists beyond the professional public health degree has historically varied depending on the specialty area. Public health educators, for example, can take the **Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES) exam** for health education credentialing. Beginning in Fall 2007, all MPH graduates can sit for a public health credentialing exam that covers all of the public health fields.