



Social Determinants: The Role Social Factors Play in Delivering Quality Care

Why are Social Determinants Important?

There are many contributing factors in understanding a person’s health status. The healthcare community has largely focused on biological factors, such as family history and genetics, as well as health behavior factors, such as smoking or alcohol use. However, growing research is showing that the social, economic, and healthcare access for both the individual and his or her community, called the social determinants of health, need to be taken into consideration to successfully treat and manage a patient.

Whole-person care can only be delivered when all factors that influence a patient’s health status are taken into account. Physicians and staff who are well-trained on the potential impacts that social determinants can have, are able to make more informed diagnoses and create impactful care plans. In addition, understanding

social determinants often leads to increased communication and more relational trust-building during the care process, which in turn, increases patient satisfaction, as well as patient retention.

DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

Figure 1 shows an estimate of how biological and health behavior factors accounts for about a quarter of population health, while the other 75% is determined by social environment, physical environment, and access to medical care.

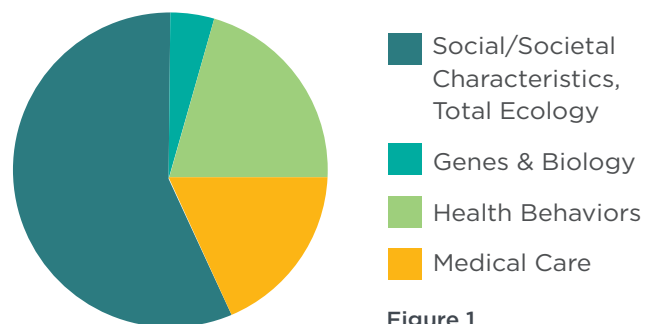


Figure 1

Examples of Social Determinants and Their Impacts on Health

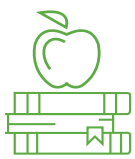


INCOME AND ECONOMIC MEANS

On the surface, having the economic resources to secure health insurance and obtain medical care when needed impacts an individual's health status. Income and wealth have even deeper ties with health as economic means also determines where we live, what kinds of foods we can purchase, an increased amount of leisure time to set apart for physical activities, and lower amounts of health-harming stress.

The relationship between income and health starts very early in life. For example, low-income mothers have high rates of infants born too early or with a low birth weight—both of which are risk factors for problems in child development and the manifestation of chronic diseases. Economic circumstances also impact cognitive development and school readiness during childhood, which has a tendency of impacting other key determinants of health as adults, such as educational attainment and employment opportunities.

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EDUCATION

Education impacts health because of the skills and opportunities that education can provide. Being educated increases the likelihood of an individual being employed, especially at a company that provides health insurance, paid leave, and retirement benefits. Also, higher education usually means having a career that provides a higher income.

Education not only provides economic benefits, but also social and psychological benefits. At school, individuals develop and build skillsets, such as problem-solving, personal control, and forming relationships, which all help with dealing with stress and challenges—stress being a driving factor in a person's health status. Educated adults are also more likely to understand their health needs, and know how to advocate for their needs and for their families' needs.



PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

An individual's health is impacted by both the physical body as well as the external environment that the individual is exposed to. The physical environment can be either natural or man-made and can either have a positive or negative effect. Natural physical factors that can affect health include air quality, water, and soil. For instance, in areas of the country where there is poor air quality due to ozone levels or other pollutants, there is a higher prevalence of asthma in adults and children. Man-made physical factors can be found in housing structures and materials, community design, transportation systems, and hazardous work places.



SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORKS

Health status is not only measured by physical health, but also emotional and psychological well-being. Therefore, social determinants are also found in a community context. The bonds that individuals form with the people around them creates healthy relationships that provide support and sets values and norms that are to

be upheld together for the well-being of the entire community. Also, social support networks provide individuals a place to share problems and gather information to practically cope with stress and help make healthier behavior choices.



ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES

Access to health services and medical care is a contributing factor to an individual's health status because health services support restorative health, as well as promote preventative health. Access to preventative services, such as immunizations and screenings, has led to improved health. However, it is important to recognize that although individuals may have access to specific health services, they may not take advantage of these services due to discomfort with using the facilities or fear of language and cultural discrimination. For instance, some facilities may not have wheelchair ramps or provide interpreters for immigrant families, which then creates barriers to receiving health services.

Conclusion

Whole-person care is complex, yet attainable through continuous education and recognition of diversity. Understanding that there are socioeconomic environmental factors that usually are outside of the patient's control, which may be influencing their health behaviors and symptoms, can lead to a better understanding of what kind of care the patient needs and the best way to deliver treatment instructions. Delivering better care through well-trained physicians and staff leads to increased patient satisfaction, which is an important factor in patient retention.

Are your providers in your network properly training staff on the impacts of social determinants on patient health and care delivery?

Interested in learning more about training your providers?

GET STARTED

<http://phprimer.afmc.ca/Part1-TheoryThinkingAboutHealth/Chapter2DeterminantsOfHealthAndHealthInequities/DeterminantsofHealth>
<http://www.cdha.nshealth.ca/halifax-community-health-board/population-health/determinants-health>
<http://societyhealth.vcu.edu/work/the-projects/why-education-matters-to-health-exploring-the-causes.html>
http://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/farm/reports/issue_briefs/2011/rwjf70448
<https://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/socialdeterminants/faq.html>
<http://www.who.int/hia/evidence/doh/en/>

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