

PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF HUMAN HEALTH IN THE CONTEXT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Fran E. Scott

Department of Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics, McMaster University, Canada

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Summary

The promotion and protection of human health is an essential activity of global society. It is a complex, challenging activity particularly in the beginning of the new millennium. Sustainable development is closely linked with health, and strategies to identify and optimize those links have enhanced importance.

This paper begins by asking “what is human health?” and discusses how health can be defined for individuals, populations and communities. Much work has been done to refine these definitions and to identify measurement tools and indicators to assess health states -both static and fluid. Still definition and measurement of health remain somewhat elusive, and these challenges are elaborated upon.

The paper proceeds to look at "what causes health?", how causation and association can be established; the concept of determinants of health is introduced and frameworks to consider these presented.

The paper then looks at “how to achieve health” within the context as it has been

defined and measured. Strategies for achieving health are discussed with special attention to health promotion and health protection in comparison with others such as disease prevention as well as treatment and rehabilitation. Population and community strategies for achieving health will be highlighted. Again, the challenge in knowing “what works?”, that is, what is effective, is discussed.

Sustainable development is introduced and the present place of human health within it presented. Sustainable development is viewed from social, economic and environmental perspectives with health as both an input and an output. The argument is put forth that true integration of human health within sustainable development is essential; and barriers exist to its integration. The paper concludes with suggestions for strengthening the concept of human health as integral to sustainable development and strategies to move towards this important goal.

1. Introduction

Human health is something that most people recognize as relevant to their daily lives. People can identify times in their lives when they were healthier than others and for the most part view the healthy times more positively than the unhealthy. Good health is considered a common value, one that individuals strive for both as an end in itself and as a route to achieve other life goals.

This paper discusses the concept of health of individuals and groups, the measurement tools to assess health and the strategies to achieve health. Each of these areas is discussed in detail to illustrate their importance, complexity and challenge. The primary perspective for these views is Canadian, as some of the sentinel health reports have originated here.

This paper will discuss the essential aspects of promoting and protecting human health: understanding and action. They are connected in a circular manner in that it is necessary to understand what is health and what causes health in order to take action, and the action taken will inform the uncertain and changing understanding that exists. It may be found at times that moving or staying put within this circle occurs more quickly than preferred in situations where action without full understanding must happen or, despite understanding, action cannot or is not taken. On the one hand academics have been praised for delving into the minute aspects of understanding but criticized because they have the luxury of not having to act. Health care practitioners have been expected to act within uncertainty and often urgency but categorized as working only empirically within a narrow understanding and without a theoretical framework of explanation.

Sustainable development is a relatively new concept which captures the importance of ensuring the future while developing within the present. It has been described using the image of a stool with three legs: economy, environment and social.

“Good health is the foundation of human welfare and productivity. Hence a broad-based health policy is essential for sustainable development.” Our Common Future p.109 (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987)

Within this central position, health can be considered the ideal endpoint of sustainable development: if successful strategies are implemented to balance the three aspects, health will be the result. It also can be considered that health is a requirement of the successful implementation of any sustainable development strategy and that the endpoint is in fact global survival.

The role of health in sustainable development is presented and the concept of health as "resource to" and "benefit of" discussed. The interplay of strategies to achieve both health and sustainable development are described.

Finally, the importance of the central role of health within sustainable development will be argued and principles to ensure both sustainable health development and healthy sustainable development will be posed.

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Biographical Sketch

Fran Elizabeth Scott BSc, MD, FRCP, MSc ; received her undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto, Canada and medical degrees at McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada. Fran Scott was a research associate in the Institute of Environment and Health and Associate Member at the School of Geography and Geology (*Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics*) at McMaster University when this article was written. Later she was appointed Associate Professor of Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics at the same University. She was also a member of the Women's Health Office Advisory Council. She moved to the University of Toronto in April 2003 where she is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Medicine's Department of Public Health Sciences. Dr. Scott is currently Associate medical officer of Health and Director of Planning and Policy in the Public Health Department of the City of Toronto.